under the shadow of militancy

the diary of an unknown kashmiri

tej n. dhar

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The diary fell into the hands of Tej N. Dhar, who has reworked it in turn to give it the current shape and form. Retrieved from the rubble of a vandalised house, the diary throws light on the life of a Kashmiri Pandit who lived under the constant shadow of death—the trauma that Pandits in the valley are familiar with. The diary recaptures the dramatic political developments in the valley in the early 1990s—a crucial period in the growth of militancy and its consequent impact on the lives of Pandits in the valley.

UNDER THE SHADOW OF MILITANCY

THE DIARY OF AN UNKNOWN KASHMIRI

Tej N Dhar

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To the memory of dear Bobji,
who could not bear the pain
of living outside Kashmir for long

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Writing is an affirmation, not only of the individual but, through him, of the nameless and voiceless multitude, who must rely on him to define the validity of their right to be.

André Brink

Introduction

Most studies of the rise of militancy in the Valley of Kashmir have given only brief mention of the problems it created for the Pandits, which precipitated their exodus in 1990. Although they constitute a very small percentage of the population of the state, it was their presence in the midst of the predominantly Muslim population that made people call Kashmir the shining example of secularism, and elicited Gandhi's famous remark that he saw a ray of hope in the place. Largely because of this neglect, the Pandits have provided their version of what militancy was like in the Valley and how it affected them. Most of these share the orientation of the books that have been written on it by other Kashmiris and non-Kashmiris, for they use the same kind of historical perspective to make sense of their present, and trace the fluctuating fortunes of their community from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Pandits have also responded to their changed situation in creative works in Kashmiri and Hindi, in poems and prose accounts, which deal mainly with the trauma of their homelessness and the pain and suffering which came in its

wake. The present work, which I shall henceforth call by its subtitle "The Diary of an Unknown Kashmiri" or *Diary* is very different from what has been written on the plight of this hapless community. It is an interesting account of public events and private happenings, intermixed with the thoughts and reflections of an individual, written as a response to fast-moving political developments in the valley of Kashmir in the early months of 1990.

The *Diary* fell into my hands in very unusual circumstances, and by what I can only call a fortunate coincidence. In the summer of 1995, I was invited by my friend Kamal to spend some time with him in Srinagar. He knew how much I loved the city that had been my home right from my birth to 1990, when I was forced to leave it for fear of losing my life. The parting words of my oldest Muslim friend, whom I have known right from my school days, and on whose advice I finally left, are still ringing in my ears: "The time of our parting has come. I know moving out from here can be calamitous for you, for it will cause endless problems to you and your family, and crush you with the lingering pain of being uprooted. But I need to tell you firmly, my friend, that you have no option but to leave. I can no longer assure you that you are safe here, and nobody, not even the most influential and politically well connected person, can vouch for your safety. Killings of Pandits have become much too random." I myself had been watching the activities of the militants with fear and apprehension. That is why the words of my friend did not surprise or shock me; they only pushed me into doing what I had been trying to avoid. For, the very thought of leaving behind everything—the place where I was

born, the people with whom I had grown up, and the small home I had set up by pooling all my hard-earned money—was unbearable. We both realized that I could do nothing about it.

Kamal was an officer in the Border Security Force, a special wing of the police force of the central government, and lived in a well-protected, high-security zone of the city. He wanted me to come over to Srinagar to escape, even though only for a brief while, the dreariness of my present situation and enjoy the beauty and pleasant weather of the place. He knew that the heat of the plains had proved the most discomforting part of the life of all those Kashmiris who had been forced to move out of the Valley.

My immediate response to Kamal's proposal was a polite refusal. I strongly felt that nobody in his right mind would accept such an invitation. I was keeping track of the damage the Valley was suffering at the hands of the mujahideen, and the misfortunes that befell the people who stayed on. Even a brief visit to the place would have meant reliving my miserable exit from there, and exposing myself to fresh wounds, but his steady persuasion won me over, and I agreed to go.

I stayed with him in his secluded house for over two weeks. From the room in which I spent most of my time, all I could see of the outside world was a part of the beautiful sky, a row of majestic poplars, a few willow trees, which looked greener than I had ever known them before, and the Shankaracharya Hill. Being mostly confined to my room, I spent my entire time in reading and writing, obviously not the best way to spend one's time in Kashmir. Whenever I felt tired, I looked steadily at the Hill till I forgot my immediate surroundings

and lost myself in the memories of the happy times I had lived in the valley.

My friend would be away for long hours, sometimes for days. Perhaps he had expected that I would move out, go places, meet people and see things for myself. For, to be out on the road was not so dangerous then as it was in the years immediately after the first wave of migration in the early months of 1990. Maybe he wanted me to re-establish contact with my old friends, but he was discreet enough not to say so openly. He knew the state of my mind and remembered how several of them had shown and even expressed their reluctance to correspond with me, for fear of being known to have links with the people who had left the valley, which meant Pandits in the main. So I did not let anybody know that I was in the city and accessible. I did not want my old friends come to harm because of me.

Being confined to my room, where the Hill and the trees were my only company, I found it difficult to cope with loneliness and silence. When it became too oppressive, I told Kamal that I would like to go back. He saw my misery, but did not accept my request outright. He urged me to stay for a few more days, so that he could spend some time with me. Several unexpected developments had burdened him with more than his usual quota of work, but he was sure of spending at least two days with me, after returning from an important mission. So he requested me to wait till then, and I agreed.

After his return, Kamal and I were together for two full days, exactly as he had promised. We talked nostalgically about the good days we had spent in Srinagar, which were in total contrast to the bleak and dismal present. I noticed that he was

unusually loquacious, and gave me revealing details about the activities of the militants and the people who supported them. He was convinced that the situation in the valley would not improve at all. With a gloomy face and a voice thick with emotion, he conveyed to me the feeling of desolation he had experienced by seeing the condition of the houses left behind by people who had fled the place. These had been subjected to extreme vandalism: the doors had been broken, windows unhinged from their frames, and everything inside them had been removed. Because all types of marauders had found access to them, they had lost the character of homes. The entire Habba Kadal area, which used to be densely populated with Pandits, and bustling with activity, looked like a ghost area, with broken, half-burnt houses leaning on each other for support.

I did not need to ask Kamal why such large-scale pillaging did not draw the attention of the police, because during 1990 I had already seen how the local police had proved ineffective in putting a stop to such barbarous acts. While giving me details on such houses, he passed on to me a small packet he had found near a mound of rubble in one such house. I became curious to see it, for I knew that looters and plunderers would hardly have left anything valuable lying around.

Brimming with curiosity, I opened the packet somewhat hurriedly. Out came a pile of unnumbered notebook pages. I glanced through these, and found them very absorbing. Reading them, I got lost and forgot my friend and the place I was in. Written in a hurried hand, the pages contained descriptions of a variety of events and happenings, a mixture of the very immediate present and the distant past. The first

few pages were about the outbreak of militancy in the Valley, particularly in the city of Srinagar, and the scare it had caused to people, especially among the Pandits, forcing many of them to flee. The later pages also included descriptions of past happenings, a large part of these being about his personal past. I found all of it extremely engaging and sought Kamal's permission to take the packet with me.

After returning from Srinagar, I reread the pages several times, trying out several patterns of their ordering and arrangement. Deciding on the exact spot for each entry was a tough job. I had to work out numerous permutations and combinations and weigh their relative merits, which proved quite a difficult task. After a great deal of hard work and patient thought, I finally settled on the shape and form it has now. To make it readable and comprehensible, I also made changes in its style.

Now I can say with some measure of confidence that the *Diary* is an account of about five to six months in the life of a person whose name I do not know, perhaps may never know. What is clear though is that during the time he wrote it, he had been living under the constant shadow of death. This colours his entire account of what he saw and experienced between the months of February and August 1990. This is, however, not to suggest that it is a mere chronicle of what happened in the Valley of Kashmir during these months. Far from it, it is a highly complex narrative in which an individual has attempted to relate himself to his specific place and time, because of a moment of crisis, which, though private and personal, was forced on him by fast-moving political changes in the Valley of Kashmir. Although it makes very few references

to days and dates, I could locate in it several events that took place during this period. These proved of great help in arranging the entries in their present sequential order.

All the pages in the bundle, except two, were fully covered with words. The first contained a few lines from a book by André Brink which, I thought, could serve as an appropriate epigraph for the *Diary*. The second had about twelve lines that ended somewhat abruptly, suggesting that these could be the very last lines of the writer. Surprisingly, the page was dated 23 August 1990.

The most striking feature of the *Diary* is that the events and happenings described in the entries often shift back and forth, from the present into the past, giving it the shape of a freewheeling, choppy narrative in which the peace and quiet of the past, reflected in almost all the details concerning the writer's private life, contrast sharply with the anxiety and confusion of his tension-filled days of early 1990. One can also discern a kind of pattern to these shifts. When his friend narrates to him the story of the Pir of his village, he is reminded of the circumstances of his birth in which a Pir and his family were involved in a significant way; when he remembers his participation in the marriage ceremony of an acquaintance who was killed by the militants, he relives the scene of his own marriage; when he watches and hears children playing a little away from his home, he is transported into his childhood days. This might suggest that shifts in the narrative could be understood through the logic of association, but I do not want to overemphasize it, for I may not be totally correct. It could be that in his dreadful state, when he knew that death could overtake him any moment, he might simply have been trying

to relive or revisit his past to make sense of his life in the present or maybe just to escape its depressive gloom. The reader is free to draw his own conclusion.

Whatever may have been the motivation of the writer for writing his account, it contains a number of interesting and diverting scenes, which come to life with lucidity and power. There is evidence to show that he had been living under great stress, exacerbated by his loneliness, which explains some of his sharp observations and reflections. The account also contains references to political leaders, their little-known but interesting opinions, anecdotes about their lives, and well-known and significant political events as well.

Another notable feature of the account is that the writer's present bouts of loneliness, in which groups of Muslim terrorists threaten his very existence, contrast sharply with events in his past life, when he was quite at ease with his Muslim brethren. There was love and affection in the lives of both communities. These events also help us to visualize him as a person who had hoped to live a peaceful and meaningful life. We also find that in spite of provocations and temptations to flee the valley, he sticks to his place, against heavy odds and against the express wishes of his friends and well-wishers, because of what one can only infer as his intuitive faith, which may be difficult to explain. The abruptness with which this faith is snuffed out, in circumstances that we can only guess, and the mood it places us in, lends a poignant quality to the account.

The *Diary* covers a very limited time span, within which it captures only the first impressions of the rise of militancy in the Valley. These, as we can see, are contradictory and

confusing. This is quite understandable, because the writer has recorded the reactions and viewpoints of the people to a contingent reality, exactly as they felt at that time. These touch upon some of the main happenings and the issues that were important then. Because we are now too far away from those turbulent times, the *Diary* suggests several reasons for the rise and spread of militancy that may be different from those we currently tend to accept. It could even be that the very same people who spoke to the writer in confidence as fellow sufferers might have already revised their opinions on people and events mentioned in it. Instead of considering it as its limitation, this could be its main merit and value. It provides an authentic record of a crucial period in the growth of militancy, which could have taken a different turn if the governments in power in the state and centre had acted differently from how they did.

One final observation. The opening pages of the *Diary* hint at the writer's intention in writing his account, but, as I have already suggested, it may not be correct to pinpoint any one reason for this. The words he quotes from André Brink suggest that he wanted to write about himself both as an individual and as a member of the community of Kashmiri Pandits, a minuscule group of people whose reasons for leaving the Valley are still being invented and re-invented by politicians, political commentators, civil rights activists, and several varieties of Kashmir specialists and buffs. The narrative vividly records the various facets of the terrorist menace and violence that the members of his community had to face and which forced them to flee for their dear lives.

I am grateful to my friend, Kamal, who has since died in

Srinagar in his fight with the terrorists, for salvaging this precious record. It gives access to a lived experience which, in many respects, typifies the experience of thousands of people of his community who have been ignored and even slighted by governments in the state as well as in the centre, and also by the people at large, because it has remained suppressed under the weight of logical analyses provided by individuals who, because they are least affected by human suffering, intellectualize it for petty personal gains.

The Diary

1

Girija and the children left with my parents this morning for Jammu, and from there they are likely to go to Delhi. My brother came for them in his car, when it was still dark, and took them along. They did not look happy to leave me, especially Girija. Everything was so confusing. She could not bear to think of me here all by myself, but everybody had insisted that she should be with our children. Because everything happened in a rush, there was hardly any time for making changes in our plan. With tearful eyes, she gave me a fond last look, and was gone. "Take care of yourself, I shall be back soon," was all that she could manage to say.

For nearly two months, while I was away from Srinagar, Girija and the children had lived a cloistered existence, shut up inside the house. The world outside had become extremely dangerous and unsafe. During my absence, the city had changed almost beyond recognition: demonstrations, police firings, and killing of innocent people by the militants had

disrupted the normal routine. Disorder had become pervasive. Since I was in the southernmost tip of the country, I had no knowledge of what was happening in the city of my birth. The day I finally arrived back in Srinagar there was a curfew in major parts of the city because some militant had died in an encounter with the security forces, and there was apprehension of trouble. When I finally managed to reach home, Girija and Vasu and Vinay clung to me and wept uncontrollably. I could see that they were frightened and worn out. For the whole night, they told me unbelievable things about what had happened in our locality and the city during my absence. I also learnt that all our Pandit neighbours had left their homes weeks ago. Ours was the only family that remained.

After my return, I could not go to my office for several weeks. The government or some organization was often giving a call for curfew or transport—both public and private—would cease in response to threats by militant groups. I came to know that staying away from work was no longer considered an offence; it had already been accepted as a part of the normal routine. If parts of the city remained inaccessible because of abnormal conditions, how could people be expected to reach their offices and places of work? However, when I finally did go, it was only for a brief while. The report of firing in some part of the city spread like a panic wave, forcing all of us to rush back to our homes, for fear that if we did not, we would be forced to walk back.

Before our hasty departure, one of my colleagues took me aside and berated me soundly for keeping my wife and children with me. Words flowed fast and angrily from him: "You fool, do you tell me that your wife and daughter are still here, in

this hell? What if anything happens to them? Do you know that they can be kidnapped and even raped? What will you do then? How will you face people, after covering yourself with shame? You have always behaved like a simpleton! Send them out before it is too late."

The words of my friend struck me dumb. I felt panic, and the rush home came as a relief, for I wanted to ensure that nothing untoward had happened to them in my absence. Though I found them safe, I could not get over the fear that had seeped into me.

Next day I rushed to Habba Kadal to see my parents, to consult with them and seek their advice. A strange sight greeted me there: they had packed up and prepared to leave the place. My mother told me that she was about to send me word that my family should get ready to join them. I put her off by saying that it was important for me to be in my office. She was unwilling to accept this, but relented when I told her that Girija and children would go with them, and that I would join them soon. So they are gone. Although I feel relieved, I also feel very lonely.

2

It took me quite some time to make sense of what had happened to Girija and the children behind my back. Now I understand that when Girija wept loudly on the day she saw me, her tears poured forth not only because I had come home safely but also because of a sense of relief, that during my absence God had been merciful enough to save Vasu and Vinay from harm. I could guess from Girija's looks that

something was eating into her, and that she was keeping something from me; in spite of my best efforts, I could not get it out of her.

When I spoke to her about the rebuke I got from my friend and she heard words like rape and defilement, she burst into a hail of tears and went limp in my arms. I held her for several minutes, and gently rubbed her heaving back. Then I cupped her face in my hands to look into her eyes to relieve her of the fear that had lain there during my absence. I did my best to make her come out with it, but it was not easy. For, whenever she attempted to say something, she just burst into weeping. Before the words could take shape, they dissolved into cries and moans. But I did not give up, for I was determined to rid her of all the dark shadows that had clouded her face.

After several attempts, when she became calm, Girija finally succeeded in formulating the words that had eluded her for long, to describe what had happened in my absence.

One evening, when darkness had just set in, she heard sounds of people talking in low tones near the boundary-wall of our home. This was something unusual, because nobody would generally be around after dark. When she peeped from the small windowpane of the first floor, to figure out who they could be, the sight paralyzed her. There were three bearded young men, all of them more than six feet tall. She understood at once from their appearance and dress that they were not local people. The more she watched them, the more worried she became. In panic, she clutched at Vasu and Vinay.

Only a week back, my friend Nazir had told Girija and the children not to get worried by what was happening around

and assured them that no harm would befall them. But he had also cautioned that if they ever heard a knock at their door after dark, they were to open it at once, and let in whoever was there, without creating any fuss or asking any suspicious questions. For they would be the mujahideen, the new saviours of the community, who needed shelter and food to keep going. When Girija said that she could not do so, as there was no male family member in the house, he became angry, for he believed that this was the minimum that every citizen should do, as they had taken on the dangerous struggle to change the political system of the state. Reacting to his mood and the urgency in his voice, Girija had not argued any further, but prayed that she be saved from acting as a host to such people.

And now they were here. Her imagination ran wild. What if they came in? What could she do? How would she keep our darling Vasu away from their sight? She prayed hard to all the gods and goddesses to lead them away from where they were, and then closed her eyes. When she heard no sound for some time, neither their voices nor a knock on the door, she opened her eyes again and found that they had actually gone.

For a moment, she doubted her eyes. Had she really seen them there? Perhaps she would not have been able to resolve this if she had not heard next morning from Nazir himself how three young men had taken shelter in another house of the locality. In the early hours of the morning, when they had left, the head of the family had looked dazed and cried loud enough to invite the attention of his neighbours. Girija was so shocked by what she heard that she did not ask about the kind of damage they had left behind. The image of the distraught head of the family whose wails and laments rented the sky clearly

indicated what might have happened. That was when Girija had sent Vasu to her parental home and asked her father to be with her and Vinay. I thanked my gods for having saved Girija from a hazardous ordeal. Her piety had stood her in good stead.

After finishing her account, Girija looked her usual beautiful self, relieved of the fright that had choked her being. Then she told me how boldly she had faced the ordeal of the night of 19 January.

3

The scolding I got from my colleague has seen Girija, Vinay and Vasu off from Srinagar. Right from the time I had returned to the city, I could very clearly see that things had changed beyond anybody's expectation. There was large-scale disruption in the lives of people; some were leaving their homes to go to safer parts of the city, and hordes of them were fleeing every day to places beyond the Valley. When I looked at Girija and the children, my heart suffered a wrench. With no money and no hope of support from any quarter, we had no chance of leaving our home. Perhaps Girija was conscious of this. She always assured me that we would not need to go anywhere. I knew that she had no earthly reason for saying so; she was simply trying to put on a brave face, to lessen my worry, and I, in my desperation, clutched at her trusting instinct.

Every day we prayed for the conditions to improve, but there were no signs of improvement, only of further deterioration, adding to our anxiety and desperation. All of a sudden, the city witnessed an unprecedented rise in

demonstrations and protest marches. Almost every day, for one reason or the other, there were massive marches, which brought work in the city to a standstill. Of these, the march to the Shrine of Chrari-i-Sharif, which was nearly an hour's drive from the city, was probably the biggest, and attracted a lot of media attention.

It was a sight that had to be seen to be believed. For hours on end, we saw virtually an endless stream of vehicles—buses, trucks, cars, vans, matadors, auto-rickshaws—in short, all means of private and public transport, packed with men, women, and children, moving at almost a walking pace, for accompanying this huge cavalcade were thousands of pedestrians.

Although the procession did not look too organized, for more and more people joined it as it moved along, one could make out that some of its features had been made prominent for public attention. For its large size, it was unusually peaceful; it was also quite disciplined. Care had also been taken to ensure that in between the vehicles there were properly decked-out trucks, which appeared after every seven to ten minutes, on which five to six young men stood up in white overalls, openly brandishing Kalashnikov guns. The moment they came in view, people greeted them with thunderous clapping. Everyone looked at them with awe, for they were said to be a part of the suicide squad of the militant force. The clapping was followed by a loud burst of songs of liberation, slogans of Azadi, and a show of V-signs, signifying victory for the cause. One could see an occasional policeman here and there, but they were no more than interested onlookers, disinclined to interfere in what was happening.

There was a lot of talk about the purpose of the march. The widely circulated view was that the mujahideen were going to pray at the famous shrine of Nund Rishi, to seek the blessings of the saint for the success of their mission. But quieter voices whispered something else: that the march was a tactical cover for another militant operation, to provide a safe cover for returnees from Pakistan who had been laced with sophisticated weapons and other materials of destruction, and were hiding near the Shrine. The religious coloration of the march was meant to keep the police at bay.

The procession generated much heat and excitement among the common people, their faces flushed with hope and expectation. One of my Muslim neighbours told me that in a few days everything would be under the direct control of the mujahideen, replacing the existing corrupt system that had made the lives of people miserable. People's belief in the imminence of change was not only too optimistic but also defied the simple norms of commonsense. When I said to my neighbour that the change he talked of did not sound workable, he set aside my doubts by saying that power would simply be handed over to them on a platter; after hearing that, there was no scope for saying anything else. People also believed that these enthusiastic crusaders had all the desirable qualities required for providing a just and fair government.

The hope of change forced me to think about my place in the projected order. I am sure, if I had asked this question to anybody there, he would have called me a selfish person. For at this time, there was no scope for asking individual questions or seeking clarifications; perhaps it was not even proper to go into the fine modalities of what would happen

after the change had taken place. At this stage, the only concern was to do everything possible to usher in the revolution; what it would lead to was a thought for post-revolution times.

My Pandit neighbour, who was watching the proceedings by my side, showed signs of nervousness. He said that revolutions are dangerous, for they always lead to violence and tyranny. When the people around us expressed surprise over this, he explained at great length the brutal consequences of the French and Russian Revolutions. I could see that his mind was moving too fast, for he saw himself as the first victim of the post-revolution times.

Now I can see more clearly than before that he was not wrong in his assessment of what would happen in the days to come, even though we have not reached the stage of the revolution yet. I can also understand why he looked frightened that day. There was a new violence on Muslim faces, and all their slogans were sectarian. It looked as though Kashmir belonged only to the Muslims. Perhaps that explained why there were no Pandits in the march. They had already been sidelined. In smaller groups and gatherings, they were being encouraged to look for fresh pastures outside the state.

4

While I was looking at what I had written yesterday, I heard a gentle knock on the door. I recognized it instantly. It was of my friend, my sole surviving neighbour, Ranjit. I opened the door and let him in. Seeing a pen in my hand and some paper in front of me, he said somewhat excitedly, "Good to see you at work. Why don't you keep a

record of what is happening around? We may forget these things later. Who knows, we may not even survive to tell people what actually happened." He had hardly finished, when in panic and despair, he shook his head and waved his arms, "No. No. No. Don't do it. Don't write anything. If somebody comes in and sees what you are up to, he will certainly take you for an informer, a spy of the Government of India. Then "they" will have proof to show to the world that every Kashmiri Pandit is a mukhbir. He took the pen from my hand and was about to tear up the papers lying in front of me, when I stopped him and requested him to be calm.

Though I could understand that Ranjit spoke out of concern for my safety, his words caused me unbearable anguish. I retorted angrily, "Do you think that the people you speak of need proof for calling somebody a mukhbir? You have yourself told me how people have either been tortured or killed just because somebody thought them to be informers. My dear Ranjit, the word mukhbir is a convenient label to justify killing people, like calling somebody a thief for punishing him. It is a strategy to malign an entire community, an old one at that, for the Muslim leadership in the state, including Shiekh Abdullah himself, has done it often in the past. I am convinced that nobody needs an excuse to get rid of me."

The image of my friend Bharat flashed past me. How callously he was done to death for no fault of his! Six young men with guns barged into his home, in the very heart of the city, where the houses look ancient and are at a kissing distance from each other, and called for him. Sensing their blind fury, for such incidents had become quite common by then, his parents tried to slow down the pace of their advancing steps

so that Bharat could hide himself, but the intruders were simply unstoppable. They pushed everybody aside, overturned everything in their way—chairs, tables, fans, tins of rice, flour, and other provisions—and thundered, "Hand him over to us! If you don't, everyone here will die." One of them put the barrel of his gun on the chest of Bharat's mother. Knowing that they would not leave without him, she and her husband pleaded with them for mercy; wailing and falling at their feet, they begged for the life of their only child. Unmoved, the militants spread out in all directions to search for Bharat and found him in an empty drum where he had tried to hide himself.

Pleased with their catch, they dragged Bharat down the stairs and brought him out on the main road, where all signs of life and activity had vanished. They beat him violently, hurled abuse at him, called him everything they could think of—an informer, a spy, a saboteur, an enemy of the revolution, in short, the most dangerous person alive—and then shot him in his various limbs, to finish him off bit by bit. After every shot, his young body writhed in pain, and his cries echoed all over the place. When he asked for water, he got a kick on his mouth and a torrent of abuse. All this happened in broad daylight, in the middle of a public road, in full view of everyone. People watched from a safe distance, behind closed windows, some with approval and some with horror. When the militants were satisfied that everybody around had been sufficiently terrorized, they shot a final bullet into his heart.

And Bharat lay there in a pool of blood, at high noon, with flies swarming around his face in dazed confusion. Nobody dared go near his body, not even his parents, because the

militants had decreed that nobody should remove it from there without their permission. The most hopeless feature of the entire scene was that the local police post, fully equipped with armed men, was barely a few hundred feet away.

5

I sometimes wonder how short and deceptive memory can be. The incident of Bharat's death took place before I left Srinagar for Mysore. At that time, the people of our community talked about it for a few days and then forgot it, as if it were an isolated incident. Most of us failed to grasp the true import of this gruesome happening. We could not understand then what looks so obvious now: that Bharat died a brutal death only because he was a fearless Pandit. He was not a submissive type, but a brave being who could stand up for his rights and fight, no matter how powerful the people who threatened him; so he had been chosen for liquidation to convey a message to us, but we failed to register it then. Many of us dismissed it as a case of personal vendetta. When I look back on this murder and the things that followed it, I shudder to think how I had foolishly left behind Girija and the children to contend with the growing menace of hate and terror in the city. I am relieved that they are not here.

And what about me, waiting for a fate like that of Bharat? Or what? Why am I still here? Is it a difficult question to answer or is it a question at all? There are thousands of people in the city: Muslims, Pandits, Sikhs, Christians.... Do they have to answer this question, or is it only me?

Do I have to make an announcement in public that I am

here because I belong here, that my roots are here, that my ancestors have lived here for centuries? I feel I should hold to my place for myself and for my children, even if it involves risking my life. But is it really that important? Should one continue living in a house which is already on fire? I am too tired to think.

It is very dark outside. And it is dark within my soul too.

6

Days tend to stretch longer than usual, and they sit heavy on me. I have been by myself for only a couple of days, but it seems as if I have been like this for ages. Is it because I have to do nothing, except to fill my belly, to keep myself alive? No work, no going out, no chance of meeting people. Since none of my close neighbours, except Ranjit, is around, I do not speak to as many people and as often as I should.

I have to learn to live within myself; dependence of any kind can be risky. I do not even know what is going on outside. I am not sure if the radio reports the events in the city and the Valley correctly. Ranjit says that it does not, because the radio station is under the control of the government. Its news coverage does not reflect the level of public resentment, so evident in the increased frequency of demonstrations and police firings, in which people die almost daily.

Only the locally published urdu newspapers, we are told, carry details related to the activities of the militants, public protests, and incidents of exchange of fire between security forces and the militants, but I do not get to see them daily. They also feature boxed items, in which people affirm that they

have broken off their links with recognized political parties, especially the ones that the militants have decreed anti-people. Ranjit is my only source of information on these things.

Sometimes I feel that I am trapped, caught in some vicious maze from which I have no power to disentangle myself. I am not sure if we really have power over our lives. Do I feel worried because I am becoming more and more vulnerable?

7

From the settee of my living room, I can see the main road and across it the small Muslim house with an unusually big gate in the centre of its boundary wall. The place swarms with people—men and women and their numerous offspring. They constantly move in and out. Reminds one of a beehive. Today the people of the house look unusually busy. After every few minutes, the gate opens a crack, a head comes out, moves left and right, stays in one position for some moments, and then disappears. This is a fascinating sight. It keeps me busy and guessing. I am surprised that I had not noticed it earlier, especially because I usually have my morning cup of tea on my settee, from where, like a safe observation post, I can see through the huge glass-framed window everything that goes on outside without being seen by the people who are out there.

The gate of the Muslim house has opened again. Now two heads are out, one upon the other, in tandem. It is like a scene from a silent film. I cannot read the faces of these people for any signs of anxiety or fear, but the necks are moving left and right at a frantic pace. Perhaps this indicates that something is going on somewhere, beyond the zone of my vision; from

their gate they can see a large stretch of road on their left and right.

With bated breath, I try to listen, to catch any possible sound, but cannot hear anything. Then the gate closes somewhat abruptly. The heads disappear. Does this portend something? I hear the roar of an engine and then a vehicle bursts past their gate. It looks like a police van. Another follows close behind it. Then there is another one. Does it indicate anything? Trouble somewhere? A raid perhaps?

8

My cup of tea has gone cold. Even before I could take it to my lips, my mind was racing fast to reach some memory in the past. And now I find that I have to go to the kitchen to make another cup of tea.

The first streaks of morning sun are already spreading. A faint golden glow is on the light gray tiled walls. How beautiful and invigorating the morning is! Oh Surinder, where are you? He worked hard to design my home. "People like us build a house once in a lifetime, so you need to give proper attention to its planning," he said to Girija and me. "Your kitchen must get the first ray of the morning sun from here," pointing to the small window on the blue drawing, "and the last departing ray from the large window on this side. The kitchen must be the most well-lighted and sunny place in the entire house."

Tears at the edges of my eyes blur my vision. This beautiful morning and the expanding warmth of my kitchen—why am I ordered to give it up? Ranjit always tells me that it is a

question I need not answer, not even think about. I know he says so only to keep me quiet, to keep me away from disturbing thoughts. But what about the notice that had been slapped on the door of my compound: Leave this place in forty-eight hours or be prepared to face the consequences. What about the boxed items in the local dailies, threatening Pandits with dire consequences for staying in their places? What about the stern warning that blares forth intermittently from the microphones fitted to all the mosques of the city: "Are you still there? Why don't you pack off?"

Who is behind this? Speaking like the official organ of the government, Ranjit tells me that they are miscreants, young men who have lost their way or their heads, who need not be paid any attention. If they are really miscreants, why does not the government round them up and stop them from spreading the virus of hate? What I do understand is that they exist, they matter, they are influential. Even the so-called government does not dare to stop them from committing atrocities. Can a government be so powerless, or is it just not bothered?

I am reminded of my grocer, because he seems to know better. The so-called miscreants, he tells me, have a very large following, which may not always be visible. They have spread their roots far and wide, in every department of the government. Nobody can stop them from pursuing their goal of establishing a new Muslim order.

In the wake of the rising power, muscle, and even popularity of those dismissed as a group of misguided youth by officials and politicians, almost all my relatives and friends have left their homes. My parents, brothers and sisters and

their families are already in different parts of the country. "Life is too precious to be put at stake here," said my brother-in-law. "If a house is on fire, it is wise to jump out of it," said my brother. "A threat is a threat, no matter who issues it, and if the government is powerless to take action against the offenders, it is insane to continue here," said my cousin.

Do I recognize this threat? Have I recognized it already? Did I send Girija and the children away only because my colleague rebuked me or because I found that everyone else in my family had decided to leave? Am I here just to save a house with a well-designed kitchen? Why can't I think clearly?

9

When I got up, I went straight to the kitchen to prepare my morning cup of tea. I had a disturbed sleep, thick with frightful and oppressive dreams. My head is very heavy, but I do not remember anything.

In the kitchen, I saw the beautiful rays of the sun already inside, and I saw something else too: an unusual movement of soldiers fully armed with automatic weapons outside in the open ground where children generally play when things are normal. When I moved out of the kitchen to my settee, I saw many more soldiers spread out in the big lane in front of the gate of my house. Some were on the main road with which the lane is connected. I could feel my heart thumping with fear. Some soldiers had climbed the nearby wall, probably to keep watch on the entire locality.

A good number of soldiers moved into the enclosed compound of my Muslim neighbour's house. They ordered all

the inmates to come out. One amongst them explained something to one of the elderly males. I could also see women in a separate corner. Some soldiers were moving in and out of the house along with the old man. I also saw more soldiers come into the lane.

I could not continue watching, because there was a knock on the main door of my house. From the side window attached to the door, I saw three soldiers with guns in their hands.

When I opened the door, the soldiers stepped in. They were surprised to know that I was a Pandit, perhaps because there was no other in the entire locality. They asked me questions about my family and me. Since the ground floor was completely bare because my tenant had left with all his belongings when the first signs of trouble had frightened his wife, the soldiers moved up and had a careful look at everything, including the attic.

When they came down, they asked me if I was not being threatened, harassed or troubled by anyone. Since I wasn't, I said no. I wondered though if they knew of the threats issued by several groups and organizations, but I refrained myself from speaking to them about these other kinds of threats. Before leaving, they got my signature on a piece of paper stating that nothing was removed from my house during the search.

After they were gone, I became acutely conscious of being the only Pandit in the locality. It struck me as ironic that we, who had lived in the Valley long before it knew any Muslims, are being told to leave the place because the ones who converted to the new faith consider us their enemies. I am puzzled by this grim turnabout. My grandmother would have

explained it as the effect of the malevolent conjunction of stars in the horoscope of our community. Traditionally, such conjunctions operate in short and long cycles of time: two and a half years, three years, five years, seven and a half years.

Is our present suffering, too, bound in a cycle of fixed years? Will things look up again after the cycle gets completed? I wish my grandmother were alive today. Formidable as she was, she would have done something to guide us in our time of trial.

10

Ranjit, a big, burly sardar, who lives five houses away from mine, brought interesting details about people's reactions to the soldiers' search. These days Ranjit is my friend, my support, and the most reliable buffer between my imminent insanity and me. Though a Sikh, he is as much a son of the soil as I am, and since my claim is presently in doubt, he is as much a son of the soil as are all the Muslims of this place. He speaks a slightly nativized version of Punjabi, but is also fluent in Kashmiri, which he speaks with a Punjabi accent. He belongs to a village that is very near the Pakistani border, where he owns arable land and a small apple orchard.

Though Sikhs have traditionally been the enemies of Muslims, because of which they suffered heavily at the hands of the tribal invaders from Pakistan in 1947, they do not feel threatened by the Muslims now. I know several Sikh families have left the city, but most of them are still here.

Ranjit has several explanations for this. One that is in wide circulation is that Kashmiri Muslim and Punjabi Sikh militants

have a common base in Pakistan and share a common goal: to oppose and break the Indian state. Comrades in arms, as Ranjit says it humorously. One of the militant Sikh leaders from Punjab had come to the Valley towards the close of last year, and addressed a small gathering of influential Muslim groups to tell them that the Sikhs sympathized with their cause. Therefore, the Sikhs of the entire Valley were not to be harassed or harmed. Ranjit tells me that this has encouraged them to stay on. In spite of this, he was not willing to take chances with the safety of his wife and children, so he sent them to Jammu. But he takes full advantage of this newly acquired immunity, moves about freely among the Muslims, and gets me bits of interesting and diverting news.

Ranjit said that the army operation was a "crackdown." When they get information regarding the presence of militants, the soldiers descend on that place along with police personnel, seal it from all possible sides, conduct house-to-house searches and interrogations to catch hiding militants, hidden guns, ammunition, and other materials. I know that crackdowns have been organized in downtown localities, which are congested and abound in intricate maze of lanes and by-lanes, but no such operation had been conducted in our part of the city till now.

Ranjit says that frequent crackdowns in the old city had put a lot of pressure on the militants and they had been forced to take refuge in more open parts of the city, where detection was difficult because escape was easy.

When I asked him about how our neighbours had reacted to the entry of army personnel into their homes, he gave me several current versions. The head of the family of the house

opposite to mine was unhappy with their behaviour. They had beaten several of his young boys, after heckling and browbeating them. One of the boys was so badly injured that he had to be taken to a doctor for treatment. But the person whose compound is within the zone of my vision had no such complaints. He said the army had been courteous and polite. When they searched their rooms, they insisted that somebody from their men-folk be with them. They were also helpful and understanding. When they asked the man who accompanied them to open the lock of a cupboard in one of the rooms, he could not do it, though he tried many times. No key from the bunch in his hand seemed to fit. Seeing that he was nervous and unduly fidgety, the officer took it from his hand and opened the lock without any difficulty.

Ranjit also said that at one place, the soldiers overturned sacks of rice, flour, and coal, to mix them into a pile of waste, to punish people for their discourteous behaviour and non-cooperative ways. Some people complained that gold ornaments and jewellery had disappeared from the secret compartments of their wardrobes, but because these were a part of their undeclared assets they could not register a proper complaint with the police.

Ranjit could have written a small book on the lighter side of these crackdowns.

When I asked if any militants had been caught and anything recovered in yesterday's operation, he smiled one of his mysterious smiles, implying that neither men nor materials can ever be caught in these operations. Even before a crackdown is under way, the militants are warned to move to safer places. In some cases, they are even helped to escape.

I fear that this cat and mouse game between the security forces and the militants may go on forever, without yielding anything. If militants have their sympathizers in every department, including the police and special intelligence wings, they can never be apprehended. Ranjit reacts to this somewhat non-seriously, but for me, it portends trouble and a steady expansion in the cycle of my grandmother's malevolent stars.

11

The crackdown appears to have had a softening effect on people. Yesterday two Muslims who live slightly away from my home came to wish me well. One of them swore by his children that he was not aware of my being here. He had assumed, he told me somewhat humorously, that like the other Pandits, I too had made it to Jammu. The other one asked me if I needed anything, and he sounded sincere about it.

Next day, I was visited by Nazir. He hugged me warmly and brought out a pot of milk and a pack of fresh green vegetables from inside his pheran. Someone in the mosque of his locality, which is nearly half a kilometer away from my place, had told him that I was still in my home. So he had come to see how I was and whether I needed any help. Since he did not see Girija and the children around, I had to tell him that I had been pressurised by my parents to send them away. He did not look happy to hear this, but after a while he conceded that I had done the right thing in view of the circumstances. He admitted that conditions in the city were worsening. He had not been able to attend to his normal work,

and so he too was suffering. No work meant no wages, and he had a wife and three children to support.

Nazir is a master craftsman, a carpenter and furniture-maker who loves innovative work. He has studied up to class five, can read and write Urdu and sign his name in English. He has set up a small joinery near his home where he makes chairs, tables, doors, windows, and other items of furniture to order; for this he has been provided financial help by the Department of Industries of the State. Before the beginning of trouble in the Valley, he was doing reasonably well. He headed a team of six to seven carpenters, who had enough work to keep themselves employed. Almost all are jobless now, because construction in the city has come to a stop.

Nazir told me things about himself that he had never told me before, although we have known each other for over ten years. It seems we talk to people when we are in some kind of crisis, which is more like talking to oneself.

He spoke of his father's struggle to keep the family going when he was still a child, the eldest in the family, and his childhood dreams, and the reasons for his decision to carry on with the family trade. But, unlike his father, he refused to rest content with being a wage earner, and aspired to be a big contractor. He had already made his father move out of their village, by selling a part of their arable land and building a new house on the outskirts of the city. The plot of land adjoining the house was fairly large, and on it he had set up his new joinery.

The disturbed conditions in the Valley have given a setback to his plans, and forced him to think about what is happening around him, to understand, for example, the true meaning of

the slogan Azadi. For, whenever there is a demonstration, or a march, or a protest-rally, the most commonly-raised and also the most-fervently responded to slogan is "*Hum Kya Chahtey? Azadi*." The slogan, which is on the tongue of even the newly born babies, also symbolizes the motive force for the actions of the terrorists.

Nazir began by asking me a series of questions, most of which he answered himself, because I encouraged him to do so. When he asked me what I thought of Azadi, I told him that it meant freedom, but for whom or for what purpose, I was not sure. That he needed to find out for himself. Instead of considering it as a political slogan, which signifies an urge for "independence," he tried to understand it in relation to his life and work, which I thought was unusual.

Wasn't he free to choose his vocation? I told him that he was. In fact, I reminded him that he had already done so. Didn't he have the freedom to pray whenever he liked and observe Friday as an off day for offering namaaz? He admitted that he had this freedom too. Then he told me that he could borrow upto five lakhs of rupees from a nationalized bank to promote his business. In short, he felt that he had experienced Azadi as he understood it.

Since I did not interfere in his search for answers, he suspected that Azadi might have some other dimension that he had overlooked or did not know. So he asked me again, more pointedly, if it meant anything else. I advised him to seek its answer from those who had promoted this slogan. He looked serious for a moment, and then burst out, "You mean those thieves and thugs? You want me to believe them, those unscrupulous politicians and their toadies, the ones who have

always changed their imaan. They tell everybody that Azadi will change our lives. What gain will it bring us? Will I get money without doing any work?"

Nazir would probably have gone on and on, but I told him that the slogan Azadi had not been invented by the politicians, but by the young men and women of the Valley, who had taken to the gun to get it for us. He took some time to take it in, and then said somewhat lamentably, "You mean these newfangled saviours who are not even sure of what they are doing. They can tell me nothing. I firmly believe that all the time they are speaking for somebody else." In spite of this, I encouraged him to talk it over with them. He laughed and said: "Do you want me to die? When people are crazy, one does not talk reason." Playfully, I said, "Then why do you bore me with your talk?" He sighed and said: "If I can't talk even here, with you, where else do you think I can?"

I would have dismissed Nazir's response as that of a man with limited understanding, wrapped in the shell of his material being, had I not heard similar views expressed by several other people who were older and more mature than people supposedly in the vanguard of the new movement. They knew what politics was and what it involved; they also had the experience of having seen different levels of leadership in the state.

I began to wonder about this discrepancy. Was the man in the street completely unhappy with the turn of events? What was the true nature of the movement launched by the militants? Nazir made me understand that it was not as popular a movement as it was made out to be. A large number of people, especially the ones who earned their living by

working on a day-to-day basis, were unhappy because of the disruption it had caused in their lives. Nazir said that many people shared his views, but did not dare to voice them freely.

In the beginning, of course, things looked quite different. When the movement splashed somewhat suddenly, causing waves of expectation, everyone seemed enthused because people had been led to believe that a new dawn was round the corner, though nobody was sure of what exactly this meant. At that time, one could smell excitement in the air and see a new luminosity in people's eyes. Some held dreams of revolutionary change, others of a pure Muslim order, though nobody seemed to know for sure what the exact contours of this might be. However, a new religious spirit informed people's varying levels of aspiration, and it became increasingly clear to me that the Pandits had no place in the new scheme of things. But now the promised dawn seemed to be receding farther and farther, and, like Nazir, many people felt that they had no option but to bear with it.

12

There was another crackdown today, but this time it worked differently. First, there was an announcement, which I could not hear clearly. When I saw people rushing out of their homes towards a nearby park, I too came out, and found a huge gathering of people there. Many Pandit families who lived in the locality across the main road were also there. Unlike me, most of the people looked quite cheerful. Men and women of both communities sat in separate groups. A uniformed officer, who sat in a chair away from these groups,

called people for questioning, one by one. Much later, when it was all over, the soldiers moved into the localities to search our homes.

While I was there, glancing around for familiar faces, acquaintances with whom I could talk and find out what was happening, I spotted the friend of my cousin, Anil. As soon as our eyes met, he beckoned me to his side. When I reached him, he asked me to follow him to his home, which was on the edge of the park, for a cup of tea. It was an unusual invitation, which I hesitated to accept, because at any moment I could be called for questioning. But he seemed to know better. My turn, he said, would come after several hours, and I could be with him for some time without causing problems to anybody.

When I entered Anil's home, I found that the rooms had been cleaned of carpets, rugs, furniture, and everything else. Their's had been a well maintained home, but now it looked bare and starkly empty. Two days ago, his brother-in-law had come with a truck and removed everything from the house, also taking his parents, wife and their only son along with him. He himself was hoping to leave in a day or two, waiting, in fact, for the right opportunity to slip out without attracting attention. Anil's father was a retired government employee and even a leader of sorts, for in his younger days he had some political links, but he had bowed to the pressure of his son-in-law, and agreed to leave the place as quietly as it had been arranged. I got another jolt of panic, for here was yet another Pandit about to leave.

Anil asked me pointedly about my plans. Plans! I had no plans. I had never thought of any plan. He had already planned

his future outside Kashmir. His wife was a trained nurse, and he had already arranged a job for her. He intended to join her in a day or two and would look for a job for himself. Since his father and mother had retired the year before, they had money and would get their monthly pension.

He spoke with astonishing ease and confidence, almost in a businesslike manner, with no emotion, no regret. I must have looked more and more worried and confused, but because he had asked what my plans were, I just blurted out, "I cannot leave the place, at least not for some time. If Girija returns and finds the house locked, where will she go?" His response was another bit of lucid thinking: "Bhai sahib, I know you are attached to your new home, because you have spent a lot of time and money on it. That is why you think of staying. But I do not think that a person who has left the city will ever return. This is a time for departures, not arrivals. Don't tell me that your wife will return to this hell, unless you force her to act foolishly. Our time in this place is over. I know the thought of your house is bothering you, holding you back. But, please think, are you the only one who has a house here?"

Pointing to the huge house of his neighbour, he continued, "He left the day before my parents left. Now you have to care for your life, and not get unduly worried about bricks and timber. I am sure you know it already that two to three Pandits are killed by the militants every day. We are no longer welcome in this place. Bhai sahib, only Mussalmans will live here. I know you are elder to me, and more educated, so I have no right to advise you. But you are no longer safe in your home. Everybody looks at you with suspicion. My Muslim colleague asked me yesterday why I

was still in this place. Why hadn't I left like the others? It sounds quite strange, even baffling; they are worried if we leave and worried also if we do not leave.

"I would like to tell you something else quite clearly: this house of mine which, of course, is much smaller than yours, is dear to me, but I have no option except to leave and forget about it. If I have to remain sane, I have to think that building this house was like buying a lottery ticket. I shall think that this lottery has not come off. Does one brood over a lottery that does not provide a gainful return? It is all a person's luck. I will tell myself that I have lost this lottery, and plan my life anew. There is no time for and no sense in thinking over what was not to be."

Anil's clarity and his powers of acceptance amazed me. He is young, I thought, and can think of building a new future with such ease. But can I do so? I am so far gone in years. I am doubtful that I have the time and energy to think of anything new. Does that mean I have to hold on to what I have? Haven't I grown with this place? Isn't it the place of my ancestors? Why doesn't Anil think like me? Perhaps he does. But he also thinks of other things: innocent murders, the atmosphere of menace, and the look of suspicion in every eye. If one cannot command trust and move about with self-respect, what is one's life's worth?

Do I need to plan like Anil? How can I contact Girija, with no mail service and no other means of communication? God, how do I know what I have to do? Has my life too become a kind of lottery, which I may lose any moment? I would have gone on and on, if Anil hadn't signalled to me that it was time that we moved out.

The crowd outside had thinned. I could see a few small groups, whose members talked in hushed tones, with a look of concern on their faces. I sat near a group of Muslims; the people in it were too absorbed in their conversation to notice me, or if they did, they did not care. They were critical of what was happening; one of them told the rest that they were in the park because of their "well-wishers," an ironic reference to their leaders. Another was red with rage, but careful enough not to give vent to it openly. Only women and children looked relaxed. Some women had brought samovars and cups for providing tea and eats to their young children. It was late in the day and we had been summoned before anybody could have possibly eaten anything.

Just then, the officer, who had been talking to people individually, beckoned me to come over. He reeled out a series of questions: if I knew any militants or suspected anyone of having links with them and if I knew of any people who had weapons in their home. I told him that I had no information on any of these things.

While walking back, my pheran brushed with the pheran of another acquaintance. I could see that it was a deliberate act on his part. For the moment I turned towards him, he held my hand, took me aside, and drew my attention to a number of people who were standing at the far corner of the park. He also pointed to me a number of houses near the road. There was a sharp eagerness on his face, and he appeared keen on talking to someone known to him, whom he could trust, and not blurt it out to someone who should not know.

Walking me to a secluded corner of the park, he said that the faces I had seen were of militant sympathizers, and the

houses he had pointed out to me had arms and ammunition in them. He even knew the exact places where these had been hidden. When I asked him if he had met the officer who was supposed to know these things, he nodded yes, but before I could say anything else, he stopped me by saying, "Don't think I am a fool to tell the officers about these things. I don't want to get killed."

I was dumbstruck. If people seal their lips and do not let things be known, how can conditions in the city improve? I was enveloped in another wave of despair. The hope of recovery, the hope of shortening the span of the malevolent conjunction of my stars, the hope of living peacefully in my own home appeared receding farther and farther.

Throwing his bombshell, my friend was gone; he had successfully unburdened himself and secured his peace, little realizing that he had destroyed mine.

While I was contemplating several unhappy possibilities, I felt the pressure of another hand on my left shoulder—gentle, soft, and loving. I moved around to find an elderly gentleman smiling at me. It took me a while to place him. He was Bhan Sahib, my father-in-law's friend. After surveying me from top to toe, he asked me how I was. Without thinking, I told him that I was not too well. Perhaps he had guessed as much, for he said, "You seem to be in the grip of loneliness, which is not healthy for a man of your age. You should move out of your home as often as you can. Why don't you come to our place and spend time with us? You just have to cross the main road. This is possible even when the curfew is on, for this part of the city is under the control of the local police; they permit this bit of movement."

He looked a picture of confidence. How could a Pandit look so self-assured in these troubled times, I wondered? I promised that I would see him soon. Very soon, I assured him. Why was he so insistent? Did he feel disturbed by the unhealthy pallor of my face or fathom the loss of depth in my voice? By the time we finished our talk everybody had left. I too started for my home, somewhat hesitatingly.

13

The walk back home was like a dream. Confused and worried, I was almost in a daze. I felt myself in a kind of Kafkaesque world, where every move I made was bound to lead to complications. Particularly difficult was to reconcile the two contrasting images I had seen there. My cousin's friend Anil was ready for departure. His suitcase was packed, everything in it neatly arranged, as if he was going on a business trip and not running away from home. My father-in-law's friend Bhan Sahib, with his smiling wife by his side, was brimming with confidence. Why couldn't I be like either of them? I decided that I must see Bhan Sahib, as early as I could.

That night I could not eat well. All the time I weighed the two possibilities available to me. The more I thought about them, the more worried I became. Sleep too evaded me for a long time. When it finally came, it brought fuzzy dreams. I saw both my cousin's friend and my father-in-law's friend calling me, holding me, and pulling me in different directions. When I felt that they were about to tear my pheran, I woke up with a start and found myself soaked in sweat.

14

Next morning, during the curfew relaxation period, I crossed over the road and stepped into Bhan Sahib's three-storeyed house. He was in his living room, smoking his specially designed hookah. Since he knew Girija well, and considered her as good as his daughter, he treated me with customary deference and affection, and created a proper sitting space for me.

Within minutes, his wife brought hot tea and steaming parathas, which I first looked at with wonder, and then ate with relish. Bhan Sahib urged me to eat more of them and was unduly expansive in his gestures. I could guess that he wanted me to feel at ease, and to open out, to tell him why I looked so worried and weak, but I did not know what to say. I just looked at him and his wife, like a lost child. He was solidly based in his room, calm and totally unruffled, with no signs of anxiety or worry on his face.

When, after a bit of awkward hesitation, I finally got to talking, I learnt that he was an inspiring presence for the Pandits of his locality, and his optimism and faith has had a healthy impact on his neighbours. Several Pandit families still held on to their places. A couple of them did business in the city, where they owned shops. But I was surprised that his sons and their wives were not around. When I asked his wife about them, she said they had gone to Jammu, because their small children had found the conditions in the city too oppressive.

While we were talking, two pheran-clad Muslims walked in, one with a pot of milk and the other with a bag of vegetables. I could make out that they were their regular

suppliers. This locality has a village adjacent to it, which is generally untouched by curfew restrictions.

The surprising thing about Bhan Sahib was that though he had retired from service and could easily have gone to Jammu or to any other place outside Srinagar, especially because it was still cold in the city, he had stayed on. When I hesitatingly asked him about his future plans, he looked at me with such amazement that I felt stupid for having asked such a question. It was quite obvious that he felt no need of formulating any plan.

He told me that whatever was happening in the city—protests, firings, and militant attacks—would be over soon. People cannot lead abnormal lives forever; sooner or later they have to come to terms with what is happening around them. He thought the whole movement no more than a flash in the pan. I wasn't sure though.

He seemed to rely heavily on what he called his understanding of the Muslim character. Having lived all his life with them, he was certain that being converts, the Kashmiri Muslims were essentially like us. They could not live with uncertainty for too long. Besides, and he said this quite emphatically, they already had access to power, money, and influence. What else does a person need in life?

If this was true, then why was there a problem at all, I asked. He said it was the handiwork of Pakistan. Having failed several times to get what it wanted in Kashmir, it had resorted to a new strategy of roping in the Kashmiri Muslim youth and brainwashing them for carrying out their nefarious designs.

Bhan Sahib gave me revealing details about the programme that the Pakistanis had started for giving it a

completely religious shape. They had succeeded in making the Kashmiri Muslims realize that living in/with India had virtually converted them into non-Muslims, for they had forgotten some of the basic tenets of their religion, and badly needed to be pulled out of their state of amnesia. This was their main propaganda plank, which they broadcast regularly and religiously from the radio stations of Pakistan and their part of the occupied Kashmir.

The TV had made it more effective, by letting the images of true Muslimhood sink into their very being. After infusing the spirit of a new resurgent Islam in the people, especially in the youth, they prepared them to undertake a trip to Pakistan, a kind of a symbolic hijrat, to turn them into worthy and reliable soldiers of the faith. This had led to a massive wave of migration to Pakistan, where young men were converted into true Muslims, by feeding them on bigotry of the most repulsive kind. They were also made to realize that they would not be successful in their true mission unless they learnt to recognize and then to destroy the kafirs, who had been responsible for deflecting them from the true path of their faith. This is how the camps in various parts of Pakistan and Pak-occupied Kashmir had been turned into places of military training. At the time of their re-entry into Kashmir, they were supplied with new and sophisticated weapons and ammunition. These very people, Bhan Sahib said, were responsible for creating disturbances in the city and other parts of the Valley.

This explanation made me more worried than before, for it did not rule out the possibility of this new infection assuming the proportions of an epidemic. Everywhere we

heard stories of more and more people enlisting for going across the border. In fact, going across had become synonymous with adventure, a new romantic excitement. Pakistani agents had succeeded in raising a large band of highly motivated local agents in the Valley, who used all conceivable ways to enlist more and more people into their fold. Wherever it became necessary, they tempted them with huge offers of money, which they gave either to them or to their parents. The entire operation was labelled Jihad, which no Muslim could dare to oppose.

I was not sure if Bhan Sahib understood fully the true power and force of the appeal of Jihad. When I expressed my apprehension that the movement might turn out to be a long-drawn affair, he dismissed it as my unfounded fear. Perhaps because I did not look convinced, he encouraged me to make my own assessment of the situation and take whatever decision I considered right about my future in the city.

I was not sure of how to respond to this. I even felt like telling him that I had already fought the temptation of running away from my place with Ms Koul, when she came to pick things from her house, which is only four houses away from mine. As if he was reading my thoughts, he told me that I was free to leave the place any time I liked, if I was convinced that it was the only course available. "Just tell me of your decision; I will see whatever help I can provide. If you need to send any message to any person, that too can be arranged." After thanking him, I returned to my place.

Bhan Sahib has complicated my situation. He sharpens my temptation to leave the place, but his beaming face and his confidence prompts me to stay on. His wife, a picture of calm

assurance, thinks that they are safe in their place. So long as she gets her regular supply of milk and vegetables, her world is stable and trouble-free. Besides, she has neighbours to keep her company. From her sunny balcony, she can hold conversation with women of three households.

I marvel at her capacity to take a limited view of things. What, if things go wrong—if there is a raid or a shoot-out in her locality? How would she respond to the situation, I am tempted to ask? But seeing her beatific expression, I get over my perverse desire. I feel like praying to God: "Please keep her safe and happy. Let no problems invade her calm abode."

Mrs Bhan makes me realize that the key to a person's stability and peace is faith. Holding on to faith may lead to disruptions, even death, but so long as it actuates people's lives, it keeps them happy. She has unflinching faith in her husband's understanding of the situation, and she does not want it to be shaken. When I returned from their home, I carried a part of her faith with me; it really was so infectious. I began to look at my situation from a changed perspective, but it proved short-lived, for next morning my friend from Pulwama came to see me after a long interval of several weeks.

15

Sunil came early in the morning to my place. I had sent word to him that Girija, Vasu and Vinay had left Srinagar and I was alone in my home. When he made three gentle taps on the door, our shared secret code, I rushed down to greet him. We hugged each other and spoke in unison, *"Tele chha marunuy,"* followed by, "No, we will quit before that." Then

he hugged me again, and I could see joy in his eyes, the joy of seeing me still alive.

He had come on his two-wheeler, he said, because public transport had become unreliable and time-consuming. Anyone could order the driver of a vehicle to stop at any place without any reason, and nobody would dare to refuse compliance, for fear of getting beaten or risking damage to his vehicle. With a two-wheeler, one could manoeuvre one's way safely and quickly by avoiding the main roads, which were almost always full of troublesome and unruly crowds.

Sunil has been my friend for long years, and is more than a brother to me. We have shared a long stretch of joys and sorrows, but he has had more than the usual share of pain and suffering, for fate has been unkind to him. I see his life as a big waste, the waste one generally associates with tragic lives, which either perish prematurely or turn into a dull, uneventful necessity. Though alive, Sunil is more dead than alive. An unhappy marriage, which was thrust on him by his parents, from which he could not get out for long years, has proved what he himself calls a millstone round his neck, and sapped him of his dreams and desires.

Because he is indifferent towards life, and is not afraid of dying, he does not feel particularly threatened by the changed conditions in the Valley. Interestingly, this has proved a source of strength for the Pandits of his village. They feel that so long as he is there, among them, capable of walking with his head erect and looking the Muslims in their eye, there is hope for them, a chance for staying on. Sunil often laughs over it. Imagine a doomed person as a heroic model! Could there be

anything more ironic than that! But his friends in the village find no irony in his situation.

The villagers consider Sunil a brave being, eminently suited to be their protector and leader. They have made his home into a kind of village Panchayat, for they go there to discuss their problems and to seek his advice. These days, their discussions are dominated by how they should tackle the problems created by the rise of militancy. Should they stay put or flee the place? For there is hardly a day when they do not hear of people fleeing the city, a large number of them being the Pandits.

Sunil's strategy so far had been to keep up a bold appearance, to let the Muslims see and know that the Pandits of the village did not feel perturbed and had no plan to quit. This he did in an ingenious manner. Every day he would walk with a couple of his Pandit neighbours to the main street of the village, exchange greetings with his Muslim acquaintances for creating opportunities for banter and bonhomie, buy a few things from the Muslim shops, say hello to his butcher, and walk back home. It was a deliberately enacted routine of pretense, to make an impression on the Muslims that the Pandits had not lost their hope and that their pyjamas were not wet yet. This had worked satisfactorily for some time.

One morning, Sunil found that there was a marked and visible change in the attitude of the Muslims he usually met during his ritual walk. Instead of reciprocating warmly to his greetings and expressing their appreciation for his and his brethren's continuing presence in the village, as was their wont, they sounded cold, even resentful. Their looks had changed, for there was a fire of hostility in them. Their talk

hinted that the Pandits were not trustworthy, and certainly not above suspicion, as if they were not in their homes, where they had been living for centuries, but had been planted there by their enemies, as part of some sinister design against them.

When Sunil questioned his intimate Muslim friends about this change, he was surprised to learn that they themselves were not sure of why they feared the Pandits. Compelled to think on his own, Sunil's guess was that it had to do with the winds of change that were invading the Muslim psyche. The air was rife with too many stories, too many rumours; every day a new one would be in circulation. Everyone had become too inventive and too touchy.

Sunil also referred to an interesting angle to the Muslim character, which he knows very well. Having spent all his time, right from his impressionable years to the present, in the company of Muslim friends, colleagues, and neighbours, he knows that as individuals they are affectionate and caring, but the moment they form part of a group, their behaviour and attitude changes beyond one's belief. They suddenly become too conscious of the obligations towards their community, which invariably involves the responsibility towards their faith. This seriously affects their attitude towards the Pandits; from fraternal brothers, they turn into the non-Muslim other.

Sunil has several stories about some of his trusted Muslim friends, who have been worried by these contrasting pulls, but have not fully learnt to come to grips with them. Some even used him as a kind of confessional board for voicing their self-doubts and uneasy thoughts, which would normally be heresy within the solid, dogmatic frame of their faith. For this, Sunil

made fun of them. Sometimes, he even felt sad for them, the way he often felt sad about his own situation.

Thinking that the resentful looks of the Muslims were no more than a response to a passing phase, Sunil persisted with his ritual visit through the main market of the village. But it did not take him long to realize that the change had come to stay; there was unease and inexplicable threat in their actions; the spontaneity and warmth in their greetings had disappeared for good. Their responses, if any, were cold and mechanical. Reflected in the body language of the younger people were signs of anger and violence. This culminated in an incident that indicated their resentment over the continued presence of the Pandits in the village.

Unlike in other parts of the Valley—in villages, towns, and the city of Srinagar—the Pandits here live in a separate section of the village, which makes them highly vulnerable. One day, late in the evening, when the whole village was enveloped in darkness, the Pandits heard sounds of slogans, first somewhat faint and distant, and then loud and near. They were followed by the shattering noise of the pelting of stones on the galvanized iron roofs of their houses. Their initial response was one of shock and fear, though many among them had suspected that something of this kind was likely to happen. Their village could not remain unaffected by what was happening elsewhere! Everyone felt frightened and cowered within, like animals that were about to be slaughtered. The menacing tone of the slogans, which were pointedly directed against them, prepared them for the worst—a looting spree or a frontal attack on their lives and

property—but, mercifully, no such thing happened. The night passed without any other untoward incident.

In the early hours of the morning, visibly frightened and agitated, the Pandits gathered at Sunil's place to seek his help and advice. After a hot debate, they agreed to go in a small group of five to six people to meet the village elders among the Muslims, and ask them the meaning of it all.

Though there is a strong egalitarian spirit in the Muslim faith, which makes all Muslims equal, irrespective of differences in their social status and levels of material prosperity, the Kashmiri Muslim believes in other kinds of sophisticated discriminations. He puts great value on what is locally called khandaniyat, a source of subtle differentiation between people on the basis of their family antecedents, which, in a way, is a throwback to their pre-Muslim past. Those who converted to new faiths, whether Muslim or Christian, invariably carried over traces of their Hindu practices and thinking into their new order. This is more in evidence here than anywhere else.

In this village, the Muslims were either Pirs, the offspring of mullahs, though all of them did not follow the ancestral trade, or the peasants, who were tenant farmers at one time, but landowners now, as a result of the land reforms carried out by the government of Shiekh Abdullah. The Pirs were learned people, who, apart from the training they got in special Muslim schools and from their elders, also had formal education. When not in their ancestral trade of delivering sermons in the mosques and looking after the religious needs of their flock, they were teachers in schools and colleges, and held administrative positions as well.

The peasants were mostly farmers or farm hands, some of whom had become rich and powerful in recent times. As the Pirs considered the peasants one of the fast rising groups of upstarts who did not have much of an education and lacked the graces and sophistication for which they themselves were quite well known, they were considered an inferior class.

The senior-most village elder Sonahjoo was a peasant, but he had a sound political background and strong links with political parties, including the one that was in power. All the villagers, including the Pirs and Pandits, respected him because of the strong tradition of respect for the village seniors and also because he was a good and gentle person.

When Sunil and his neighbours narrated to him the incident of the previous night and asked him if this was a kind of warning to them to leave the village, he was not sure of what to say. Looking completely confused, he admitted quite candidly that he was not prepared for such an inquiry and unwilling to think of himself as a lawgiver or an arbitrator who could decide such an important issue on his own. But because of age-old ties between the two communities, and also because he was well-intentioned, he told Sunil to give him some time to think it out, for it might involve consulting his peers and other members of his community. Sonahjoo acted with great speed and sent word to Sunil that he would come over to his place in the evening to speak to him about the import of the happenings of the previous evening.

16

What transpired at Sunil's place is an incident of high drama, marked by violent emotional turns and bumps in people's expectations. It also brought to the fore a particular kind of mentality, which is also the mentality of a large number of Muslims who are in actual control of affairs in the Valley. I wish I could reproduce what happened in the meeting in Sunil's inimitable narrative style, with all those flourishes of humour and suspense, which he so adroitly dramatized before me in my room. Mine is at best a poor, second-hand version.

When Sonahjoo knocked at his door in the late evening, Sunil woke up with a start. He had just fallen asleep after speaking to his brethren about what had transpired at his place, and the various possibilities that his visit could open for them. Sonahjoo walked in along with a sizable group of people, representing a wide cross-section of the village Muslim population. After welcoming them to his large living room, Sunil requested Sonahjoo to allow him to get a few of his close neighbours to attend the meeting. So the Pandits too walked in. When word went around, many more rushed in. Because all of them could not be accommodated there, some were forced to stand near the door; others perched on the windowsills, and many others, to Sunil's discomfort, had to wait outside. All of them wanted to be there because they were keen on knowing what chances they had of staying on in their homes. The meeting was indeed crucial for their future in the village.

Since his mother, like so many other Pandit women of the village, was already in Jammu, Sunil told his Muslim friends

that he could not offer them tea or any hot drink, only cigarettes. And cigarettes they gladly accepted.

Sonahjoo began his address somewhat hesitantly, for he fretted and fumbled for words for a few minutes, creating awkward moments, which everybody noticed. But soon, he spoke with clarity and confidence, and in a measured tone, delivering what people later called a perfectly correct political speech, though much of its impact was blown away by another speech, which followed his.

Almost in the nature of a prelude to the problem at hand, he dwelt at length on the tradition of mutual respect among the Muslims and Pandits and the long history of their happy coexistence in the village. Then in a somewhat veiled manner, he spoke about the nature of the current crisis, which, in a roundabout way, he described as the expression of dissatisfaction among the people of the Valley with the existing political arrangement.

Though he did not make any open reference to the communal overtones of the movement, he stressed the need for mutual togetherness of the two communities in this hour of trial. He also dwelt on the responsibility of the good Muslims towards the Pandits, because, even according to the tenets of Islam, they were enjoined to protect their neighbours from harm. Seeing that members of both communities heard him with respect, he stated boldly that the Pandits had no need to fear for their lives. The people who had pelted stones on the roofs of their houses were mischief-mongers, who had not only created bad blood between the two communities but also sullied the good name and reputation of the village. Their action deserved to be condemned in the strongest possible

terms. It almost emerged as a kind of climactic pronouncement, intended to set at rest whatever fears the Pandits had experienced since the previous evening.

Sonahjoo's words, spoken as they were in a firm tone, led to the easing of tension in the room. The Pandits had a new light in their eyes. The exchange of slow whispers among them indicated signs of relief. Every face in the room looked relaxed. Everyone thought that the meeting was about to end.

Looking particularly pleased with himself, Sonahjoo asked Sunil for another cigarette. So a brief pause followed. After lighting it, he looked like making a final declarative statement, when a young, educated Pir, who taught in the neighbouring government school, sought permission to express his views on this important occasion.

This unexpected intrusion sounded somewhat out of character with the general mood of the evening, but hoping that it would be no more than an endorsement of what had quietly been accepted by then, Sonahjoo declared in an expansive manner that everyone was free to say whatever he wanted. Judging from what actually happened, Sonahjoo could not have bargained for this in his wildest dreams.

The Pir provided a blow-by-blow refutation of what Sonahjoo had so assiduously built as a positive gain of the meeting. Without mincing words, and with unflinching clarity, he destroyed the basis of Sonahjoo's thesis of the mutual coexistence of the two communities. Quoting a verse from the Koran, he repudiated the idea of Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai, and called secularism a hollow principle, which had no place in Islam, though it had been espoused and advocated in Kashmir by leaders of all hues. It was only a sham, a tactical ploy, used

by them to win elections and to keep themselves in power. The idea of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood was just a slogan, used by the politicians of the state for their selfish ends, and, therefore, a big lie that people had been made to swallow for too long. The fact was that Pandits were kafirs, who had nothing in common with the Muslims. He pointedly said that he recognized no constitution, no government, and no authority, except the one that was enshrined in the Koran. The main cause of the present trouble, in fact, was the denial of this reality, and the consequent injustice meted out to the Muslims of Kashmir.

Sunil's narration of this part of the meeting was superb. Sonahjoo's face shrank to the size of his palm; the cigarette between his fingers turned quietly into one of ash. Everyone looked stunned. Time no longer seemed like ticking. Everything in the room was frozen, standstill. It was only when Sonahjoo's finger got scorched by the last bit of the burning cigarette, which drew a low moan from him, that there was an uneasy stir in the room, and everyone woke up to find where he was. Taking advantage of this, the Pir made his final, clinching pronouncement: "I want the Pandits to know that their life with us is a part of this bogey of mutual coexistence, which has no basis whatsoever in our lexicon. The Muslims have no obligation towards them. However, they can rely on our generosity, avail of our tahafuz, and live like second class citizens. That is their only hope."

Sunil had been watching carefully the changing character of the meeting. The peasants had no match for the erudition of the Pir. By sprinkling his talk with quotations from the Koran, which he recited with his impeccable enunciation, he

had overawed them completely. With a quivering voice of high emotional vibrancy, he had brought Sonahjoo and his cohorts to the lowest level of submission.

Sonahjoo looked paralyzed and without any clue about how to save the situation from ending disastrously. He stood up to say something, but he was hardly intelligible, and the people did not seem prepared to listen to anything. It was quite obvious that the Pir had left him without any chance of re-establishing his credibility. Many others, who had come with Sonahjoo, were totally confused, and not sure of what to do or how to react.

Seeing that the meeting had been thrown into an awkward confusion, and that the suspense was becoming unbearable, Sunil showed remarkable courage, and took control of the situation. He told the Muslims that he was thankful to them, particularly to the Pir, for making the Pandits aware of their true position, but asserted that he was not willing to stay in the village at their mercy, and would advise his brethren to re-think their decision to stay. At this point, some of Sonahjoo's close associates tried to persuade him not to announce drastic decisions in a hurry, though all of them looked visibly eager to leave the room. Without paying attention to what they were trying to say, much of which was lost in the noise that was getting louder and louder, he virtually dispersed the meeting. He thanked all of them, shook hands with everybody, including the Pir, who was at one time his best student. When Sunil hugged him, the Pir, with a fierce glint in his eyes, stood unmoved.

Sunil gave me many more interesting details about the content of the Pir's oration. It was quite apparent that he had

come fully prepared to strike at the old guard, and to assert his position at an appropriate moment. Considering that he rendered all other Muslims speechless, it became sufficiently clear that the viewpoint of the Pir dominated the Muslim thinking at this time. The hard-liners in the movement had taken over from the ones who had visualized some hope for the old order, in which the Pandits formed a part of the sociopolitical system. The Pir spoke vehemently against all the older leaders of Kashmir, without naming them in particular, for their selfishness, and their lack of respect for the faith. Quite significantly, he spoke approvingly of Gilani who, as an elected member of the Legislative Assembly of the state from the Jamai-t-Islami party once quoted a verse from the Koran right on the floor of the House to prove how the secular ideal was a falsity legitimized by politicians in the name of Muslim brotherhood.

I am not sure whether Gilani or the Pir truly represent the Muslim view, although in the context of what is happening now, it looks like they do. But it is very different from my experience with the Muslims in the past, which has been quite pleasant. It never occurred to me then that the Muslim position was one of hostility towards the Pandits. That is why I find it difficult to understand this changed position. Is it the effect of the new doctrinaire approach to religion that has come from the Middle East? I firmly believe that true religion cannot impede the growth of vital, meaningful human relationships. That is what it was like in my past. Even if it was a lie, though I am not sure of that, it was beautiful and pleasant.

17

A long time ago, there existed a small mohallah in the heart of the old part of the city of Srinagar, where the houses, built several decades before by the ancestors of their present occupants, had remained untouched by the architectural innovations of our times. In many ways, it was even a primitive one. The houses were old-fashioned; some were in need of repairs. There was no major road in the locality, only a number of small, narrow, intricate lanes, which provided for pedestrian traffic, and the only connection with other parts of the city.

Its major area was covered by a large number of graves and tombstones of different sizes, most of them in varying stages of decay. For want of an appropriate place, the children of the locality had virtually converted the graveyard into a playground of sorts. No grave was allowed to survive for too long; it had to make way for a solid and even space, which was used for creating a number of mini cricket pitches. On sunny days of temperate weather, it was a sight to behold. Cricket balls would be flying in all directions, hitting bats and players at all conceivable places. On the other side of the graveyard, where the number of houses was the largest, was a small, shallow stream that looked full and pleasing only when the other rivers in the city were in spate.

In this mohallah of over three hundred houses, there was a small unit of three houses, built in such a way that they provided for two compounds. One was pavėd all over with slabs of stone; the other was a patch of green grass with flower-beds on the margins, and with space in one corner for a small kitchen garden for growing vegetables. All the three houses

differed in their size and make-up. The main house, which stood on one side of the stone-paved compound, had three storeys. It had two large rooms on the ground floor; a part of the room on the left-hand side was the kitchen, a little space clearly demarcated for cooking. It was fitted with a big hearth and several mud slabs in the wall for storing utensils. It was adjacent to the main living room, where meals were served hot. The middle floor of the house had two rooms, with beautiful latticed windows and sliding partitions inside them, which divided the rooms into two sections, and were the main bedrooms for the family. The top floor was one large space that jutted out at the right and left corners of its front. Except for the main outer walls, there were no other walls there. A part of the left-hand corner was divided from the rest of the area by a small wooden barrier, which was used as a kitchen during summer months.

On top of this floor was the roof of the house, its most unusual and striking feature. We could go up there through a small aperture, with the help of a small ladder, which had been fixed there permanently. The roof was a huge block of inclined mud on wooden sheaves and a special kind of bark, which was supported by big round logs. During the winter season, especially during severe ones, when snow fell regularly and relentlessly, and it accumulated to a threatening bulk, labourers were engaged to push it down with huge wooden spades. It always remained moist till the coming of spring and turned into a veritable garden during spring and summer. I remember what a large variety of flowers grew there, red tulips always outnumbering the others. I would often go up there and spend hours surrounded by them, and dream of happy times ahead.

The middle section of the house was used for bedrooms. The lowermost floor was living-cum-dining space for winters, when days were short and nights long, and the compound remained covered by snow for days together. The uppermost floor was living-cum-dining space for summers, when days were warm and sunny. It was a marvel of planning: the movement from the ground to the uppermost floor was related to the changing seasons of the year, and served perfectly to keep people fit and going.

Those were lovely times, when life was wedded to the rhythms of nature, when we felt and responded to changes in temperature, the shades and colours of the varied seasons, and the mood of the year. Those days, I knew all the people of our locality by their name, and I played with children in the compounds of our neighbours, and had a great time. All the love and affection I received was from the Muslims, because ours was the only Pandit family in the entire locality.

It was in this very house that my mother gave birth to me during what was later considered one of the worst winters of Kashmir, when snow had accumulated to a frightful height, blocking doors and windows. She has an interesting story about my birth. On that day my grandfather had arranged a big feast, to which almost all the relatives and several friends of the family had been invited. The feast in those days meant having a date with roganjosh, kaliya, yakhni, kofta and large chunks of fish dipped in the cold gravy of red chillies. My aunt was a specialist in cooking this dish; it had to be hot enough to make people perspire in their face even during the coldest of winters.

The winter season was particularly geared to eating big

meals—with meats, fish, and dried vegetables cooked in homemade blends of aromatic masalas. It has not taken me long to understand why most of the Pandit festivals fell during winter months and why they could not be celebrated with due propriety without cooking such delicacies. Winter was a time for eating rich, tasty food. The body needed it most during this part of the year. My grandfather used to say that winter was the time when people made their bodies big and strong.

The feast given by my grandfather was no routine winter feast, but a very special one. My mother was returning to her husband's home while still in her first pregnancy. In those days, her husband's home meant her in-law's place, because the husband was a part of the complicated network of a large joint-family. She came duly decked out in a beautifully made rafal saree and a pashmina shawl of exquisite needlework, accompanied by servants who carried huge wide-rimmed clay pots brimming with curds that were garnished with intricate designs of blood-red saffron and cardamom seeds, and several varieties of locally-baked bread, bags of rice which exuded aroma one could smell from a distance, and a small sack of silver rupees, for this was the custom then. But she did not look like a bashful bride; with a belly big and round, she was a beautiful picture of an expectant mother. Being a jolly fellow, Grandfather threw a meaningful look at my father, beamed with pride, and smiled expansively with expectation. But probably he had not thought that it would be so soon.

When the womenfolk of the house helped my mother in, she looked tired and exhausted. She had come in a tonga and suffered discomforting bumps on the way, for the roads in those days were uneven, often broken, with stones jutting out

from the surface, like big, sharp nails, and tongas would swerve sharply from side to side, making the passengers shake continuously in their seats. She had also to walk nearly half a mile, because after getting off the tonga at the main road, she had to cross a number of narrow lanes to reach home.

After an hour or so of her arrival, she felt pain, but kept quiet. She knew that she was not to deliver before the feast was over. Her mother had impressed upon her to take care of that. If the child had been born before the feast was over, Grandfather would have suffered a loss of face as well as a loss of money, for guests would have left the place without touching the most-appetizing food. So she put up a brave face and did not let anybody know that she was in pain. But probably because I was too keen to smell, if not to taste, what had been cooked, as my mother often tells me mischievously, I did not allow her to remain quiet. When I kicked my legs and waved my arms for finding my place in the world, a low moan escaped her lips.

It was an unusual moment for the guests outside, for the moan had alerted them all. With ears cocked, they held their breath; my uncle whispered something in Grandfather's ear. His brows tightened, but he remained calm. He sent word to the people who were looking after my mother that she be removed to the innermost part of the bedroom, behind the partition. He also directed the cooks to act with speed, and gave his full attention to the guests. Since all of them squatted on the floor, the host had to ask everybody individually if he or she wanted an extra helping of any of the numerous dishes. Wisely, he also sent for the daughter-in-law of Amirjoo, a highly respected Pir, who was our close neighbour.

It was getting late in the evening and the snow had just about started falling again. The guests who were busy eating had probably guessed that something was amiss, for they could not be blind to the unusual movement of people from inner to outer rooms, but they had no clue about what was happening. When some of them asked to see the bride so that they could bless her, Grandfather told them that she was too tired to meet anyone. This was quite an unusual, even an impolite, statement to make in those days, because brides, who were first daughters-in-law and then anything else, were thought to be indefatigable; they could be called upon to be up and about at any time of the day or night. Because my Grandfather had the reputation of being a choleric person, nobody dared say anything to him. And that, I must say, saved the day for him. For when the last and the largest group of the guests was having their meal, my mother could not put a leash on her pain. It just came in waves. With no midwife around, the Pir's daughter-in-law Nura, a sweet person with milk-white complexion and with hands tender but efficient, showed remarkable common sense and presence of mind. Without getting panicky and without making noise, she urged my mother to heave her body in rapid sways and to apply downward pressure. My mother tried and tried and finally succeeded in throwing me out. Nura caught me in her arms, snapped my umbilical cord, and cleaned me of my mess. Since she had already asked for hot water, she gave me a bath and put me by the side of my mother.

When the midwife Fatah finally arrived, panting and swaying her huge frame, she was left with no work, except to take her money, and touch me with her rough hands to

ensure, as best as she could, for she knew no midwifery, that I was in one piece. She narrowly escaped making a faux pas, for she was about to congratulate my grandfather in her loud voice, right from where she was, when somebody alerted her to the presence of the guests around. She understood at once the delicate and complex nature of the situation and put her finger between her teeth, as an expression of her relief. Then somewhat diplomatically she said to grandfather that my mother was all right and there was no need to worry, and that he would get the good news around morning.

After the last of the guests had left and the fire in the hearth had turned cold, Grandfather rushed in to see me . Finding me in Nura's lap, he congratulated my mother and kissed her on her forehead; she looked visibly relieved that her motherhood had not led to a family embarrassment. Then he kissed Nura's forehead, called her his worthy daughter, and put a silver rupee in her hand, as a token of his appreciation of the good deed she had accomplished. Nura came from a rich family and had been married into an equally affluent family, who could any time have bought us all together with our houses and dumped us in the river, as they say in our tongue, but such was the love and consideration among neighbours and people's respect for aged people of all communities that she kissed the coin and thanked my grandfather profusely for his generosity, and blessed our entire household.

In the dead of the night, when the snow was falling thick and fast, my father escorted Nura to her home, where her father-in-law Amirjoo was waiting with anxious eyes. Wise and astute as he was, he rightly guessed the import of her smile.

He walked up to my father, hugged him tightly, and blessed him and his progeny for full five minutes.

This was the Pir I knew at the time of my birth. Now Sunil was telling me about a different Pir. What a change the world around me has suffered during the past few months! Amirjoo passed away several years ago, and the likes of him have also left this world. Grandfather too is no more, and the likes of him have also passed away. Only wretched beings like me have survived to witness the turbulence of the present times, and to mourn the loss of those happy days.

18

Sunil's account of the meeting in which the Pir spoke loudly and clearly about a new Muslim position is still ringing in my ears. It is becoming increasingly clear to me that the Pir projected the view of the militants of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen variety, an influential group of militants that owes allegiance to Pakistan. Their's is a fundamentalist position which has been growing fast and pushing into background the position of a more moderate group represented by the JKLF.

I fail to understand why this should have happened, because successive governments in the state did everything possible to respect and strengthen Muslim majoritarianism. Right from 1947, when Shiekh Abdullah became the first Prime Minister of the state, the professed intention of the government has been to remedy the backwardness of the Muslims in the speediest manner possible. Although the state did not have enough resources, education in the state was made free from the primary stage to the postgraduate level.

All the educated Muslims received preferential treatment in getting government jobs.

The jokes that spread with this special drive have been in circulation for long. When a group of Muslims who had just matriculated were given high positions in the revenue department, over the heads of better-educated Pandits, several officers, including the Muslims who had climbed up the ladder because of their ability and merit, expressed misgivings about the performance of the new recruits, and its unhealthy effect on efficiency in the government offices. The Shiekh heard them, but brushed them aside by saying that all the new officers would be provided with a turbaned fellow (which in those days meant a Pandit, because most of them wore turbans), who would ensure that work did not suffer in any way. Besides, the job of the officers was only to approve and authorize what was put up to them.

The arrangement worked exactly as it had been visualized: quite smoothly. As expected, the government opened many other available avenues for the newly matriculated Muslims. That is how the ranks of the Muslims in the officialdom of the state government swelled with every passing year. This gave a boost to their levels of aspiration too. Several of my friends actually got high-ranking positions in the bureaucracy and other key departments of the government merely because they had been born Muslims. One of them told me, though somewhat humorously, that this was the minimum that the government of India owed to them. Thus the procedure firmly established by 1950s became an unwritten law for all the successive governments to follow.

Unfortunately, this also created new avenues of corruption, which has virtually been institutionalized by now. You can get nothing done without paying money, or you can get anything done by paying money. Corruption has developed into a professional service, with agents and sub-agents, who help aspiring people to reach the place of their dreams. But this is only for the Muslims; if some non-Muslims have squeezed out any benefits, it is more of an exception than a rule.

If every Muslim hoped to get what he or she wanted, then why this problem? Pir's exposition provides the answer. The roots of the current problem in Kashmir are not economic, as many people in the country, especially the loud-mouthed politicians and some noisy political commentators, are not tired of saying, but religious. My friend Raju often quotes H. G. Wells on this: wherever the Muslims are in a minority, they plead for democratic rights; but where they are in a majority, they fight for a theocracy. So Kashmiri Muslims, like Sunil's Pir, got the fruits of education and office to grow beards and to quote the scripture. After finishing his work at school, he would preach a new gospel of brotherhood, in which all the Muslims of the world were bound in the sacred thread of their faith, leaving the Pandits out, even though they were their next-door neighbours. The most charitable they could get was to accept them as helpful adjuncts, for their role in creating the possibilities of this new order. The Pir had a three-storeyed house, went about in his Maruti car and counted all he had got as the munificence of Allah and not the result of the preferential treatment meted out to him by the government.

When I asked Sunil how the villagers reacted to the outcome of the meeting, he said that it became a hot subject

of debate among the villagers. The older set of Muslims did not fully share the belligerence of the Pir, but, at the same time, did not dare to disapprove openly what he said about the secular ideal. The Pandits now knew clearly and hopelessly what they had known in their bones: that they could not stay there for long. Sooner or later they had to quit; there was no room even for entertaining false expectations.

The Muslims who openly criticized the Pandits for spreading panic by fleeing their homes needlessly were exposed and silenced. Whatever vestiges of mutual consideration between the two communities there were, which had already looked like resting on a shaky foundation, had finally collapsed. This had caused pain all over. One of the younger Muslims who experienced it the most was Shabir.

19

Shabir was Sunil's student in the government-run village school. He belonged to a lower middle class family of peasants, and was the first member in his family to receive the fruits of education. Though not a model student, he was a worthy one. He loved and respected Sunil because he had helped and encouraged him to get access to the world of knowledge. Sunil too showed special consideration for him. Shabir was free to go to his place whenever he wished to sort out a problem or just to spend time with him. They were friends now, for Shabir had grown up and was a responsible wage earner. When relations between communities get strained, such friendships become the source of pain and tragedy.

Before the Pir made the Pandits conscious of the precariousness of their position in the village, Shabir would visit Sunil only to argue with him, quite fiercely at times, but without being impolite, that by fleeing the valley, the Pandits were giving a bad name to the Muslims. Sunil tried his best to make him understand that the problem was not as simple as he thought. Besides, he himself was there, right in his home. If many others had left, he could do nothing about it, for everybody was free to think and make his own decision. Then, in a voice steeped in emotion, he would say, "Don't you have faith in your Shabir? Rest assured, no harm will come to you here." I find it difficult to understand why Shabir was so confident. He surely would have known of the thinking and activities of the likes of Pir, and the change that was sweeping the minds of the Muslims of the valley. And yet he was hopeful of things not going wrong, and still kept his faith. He knew that Sunil had taught scores of young men of the village, and relied on people's sense of gratitude. Shabir, I felt, relied too much on the power of good faith.

During pre-Pir times, Shabir used to pass by Sunil's window, tinkle the gleaming white bell of his bicycle, as greeting and signal, and wish him well for the day. While returning from the same route, he would stop for a brief chat, and wish him well for the night. On Sundays and holidays, he would drop in, talk and argue with him on topical issues, but lately he only discussed the baseless fear of the Pandits. Being indulgent towards him, Sunil overlooked his nearly dogmatic assertions and the severity of his criticisms; he knew it well that Shabir did not wish ill of anybody. If he

talked with anger and vehemence about things he did not like, it was only because he considered them wrong.

A few days after the Pir episode, Sunil waited vainly for Shabir's greeting. He heard the tinkle of his bell, but it wafted breezily and was gone. When he came up to the window, he saw only the tail of Shabir's bicycle. Sunil gesticulated to ask the reason of his unusual hurry; he signalled to say that he would see him in the evening. But even when the evening wore away and darkness set in, Sunil did not hear the tinkle of Shabir's bell. He got worried, because under no circumstances would he have not kept his word. Almost panic-stricken, Sunil feared for his safety, and thought of all possible things—an unfortunate accident, an untoward calamity. The mere thought of the last possibility filled him with fear. Shabir's respect and liking for Sunil was widely known, and some Muslims did not take kindly to this attachment.

Not being able to bear it any longer, Sunil came out of his home to find out what had happened. The first person he met outside was his neighbour Shamji, who looked very distraught. When he asked him the reason of his worried look, he got a shocking reply: that it was to do with Shabir, who had come to him in the evening in a very disturbed state, and told him in a choking voice: "Please speak to my teacher for me. Tell him that I am sorry for my criticism of the Pandits. I was unfair in blaming them for fleeing the place. Now I know it was I who was in the wrong, not they. Please tell my teacher that his life is in danger. I cannot face up to him, and I cannot speak to him now. Please tell him to leave the place as speedily as he can." After saying so, he had burst into tears.

Shamji had to hold his convulsing body and assure him that he would do his bidding without fail. But Shamji himself had been so shaken by what he had heard that he did not even remember to ask him why he felt so worried now, and what exactly had shaken his confidence.

After hearing Shamji, Sunil walked towards Shabir's house, which was in the other section of the village. Everybody in his home was surprised by his unexpected visit at such a late hour. When he asked Shabir why he had not stopped by in the evening, he just hung his head low and looked like a frightened animal. Sunil had to coax him into speaking his mind. In hushed tones, Shabir told him that he had overheard a group of people talking about him. They felt that so long as Sunil was there, the Pandits would not leave the village. Therefore, they needed to do something to see him out of the way: either by frightening him, so that he left on his own, or by liquidating him, if he didn't. Though Sunil tried to probe him further, to get to know what the group was up to, he failed to get anything else from him. Shabir remained silent, tongue-tied.

Sunil used his connections in the village to find out why he had suddenly become so important. A sizable section of the militant lobby, which had the support of numerous fundamentalist organizations, believed that their dream of a perfect Muslim order required that the Pandits leave the valley. This had been confirmed by the Pir episode. Even the ones who did not favour this did not oppose it; they, in fact, found it profitable; for, apart from cleansing the valley of its Brahmin roots, it opened up possibilities of economic gains as well.

Sunil is still with his co-sufferers and I am worried for him and the Pandits of his village, for the reports of people being terrorized are on the increase.

The happenings in Sunil's village are quite depressing. Optimistic as my wife has always been, she told me at the time of leaving Srinagar that she would be back soon, and that I should wait for her and not get unduly worried by what was happening around me. Dutifully, I am staying put, like the little Casabianca I read about in one of my poems in school. What if she fails to turn up before I meet the fate of Casabianca?

20

I try hard to keep myself occupied, and not to think too much about what might happen to me. I try reading, but cannot concentrate; my mind wanders all the time. Writing works better; it keeps me involved. These pages are also growing in volume.

While I was on the porch this morning, trying to warm myself in the morning sun, I saw my doctor-friend passing by the main road on his scooter, with his wife on the pillion. I waved at him, and beckoned him to come in. He complied at once, as if he wanted it. He lives a mile ahead of our house in a newly set-up government colony, where he has built a beautiful house. Before that, he lived in a cramped dwelling, far inside the old city. I know how he heavily borrowed money from different sources to make his dream come true.

When I asked him how things were with him, he just shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he was not particularly happy. Within minutes he confessed that he was in a state of

utter hopelessness; he had no option but to stay in the city. Because he was a doctor, he had been issued a curfew pass, to attend the hospital everyday; like other government servants, he could not afford to stay away from work. He had sent his mother and children to Hyderabad, to his brother's home, to keep them away from the cold, as he did every year; this time, it was also to save them from the newly generated heat, which was threatening human lives. I wished him well and they both left for their home.

Three days later, Ranjit and his cousin came to tell me that the doctor had left for Jammu along with his wife, by air. Seeing me astonished, the cousin assured me that he was speaking the bare truth, and then came up with the story of what had forced them to leave so unexpectedly.

The doctor had been receiving threatening phone calls for several weeks, but he ignored them, thinking that it was a mischief played by people who did not like him, which was common now, like those warnings in the newspapers that directed Pandits to leave within forty-eight hours or face death. One day, when he was not home, his wife took the call: "Oh! Is that the doctor's wife? Pleased to hear your voice. Will you kindly tell your husband to quit before it is too late." Taken aback by this sudden and unexpected request, she said nothing in response, upon which the voice on the phone grew stern: "Do you hear us, Mrs. Doctor. We mean it. We will blast you both out of this world along with your house." She became so nervous that the phone fell from her hand onto the receiver, silencing it for the time being.

When her husband came in the evening, she ran into his arms, and, with tears coursing down her cheeks, told him

about what she had heard on the telephone. But he took it lightly and convinced her that such calls were not to be taken seriously. Several other people known to him had been receiving them frequently.

Next day, just after the doctor had left for the hospital, the phone rang again. This time, the voice appeared too close to her, as if somebody was peering over her shoulder: "You are under our close watch. You seem to take things lightly, but we warn you not to do so. Now hear me for the very last time. If you and your husband are seen here tomorrow morning, it could well be your last day in the world." She felt terrified and dizzy; cold sweat broke over her limp body. With great effort, she managed to call her friend for help. Sensing her state of fright, the friend suggested that they leave their place for a couple of days, and then decide what to do next. Perhaps there would be no more calls after that. When the doctor returned in the afternoon, and saw her condition, he agreed that they stay for some days with her friend, who lived in a less troublesome locality of the city. Before leaving the place, he called his brother-in-law to tell him that he was going to be with a friend for some days and would be available on a different phone number.

The very next day, after the doctor had returned from his office and was having tea at the house of his wife's friend, the telephone rang. His wife's friend took the phone, and handed it to the doctor, because it was for him. Presuming that it would be from his brother-in-law, he did not wait for the person to speak and began with a pleasantry, but when he heard the voice and its menacing tone, the cup of tea rattled in his hand: "Doctor, you cannot escape your fate by changing

places. We have been trying to tell you that you have no option but to leave, but you don't take us seriously. Now here is our final warning. By tomorrow morning, you must be off, and don't you dare to be seen around your home." The doctor turned pale and felt frightened. He borrowed money from his friend and, with whatever clothes he had got with him, took the early morning flight to Jammu along with his wife. Hugging his friend at the time of his departure, he said to him, "One does not have to die to prove that one's life is in danger. My life means much more to me than anything else. What if I don't live it in the land of my ancestors? Does it really matter? Good bye."

The doctor's story was horrifying. For a moment, I felt afraid. One of my neighbours, who had left weeks before I returned to the city, had wrapped his telephone in a quilt, because it issued only threats and warnings.

21

It is warm sunshine outside, and the curfew is on. In short and long spells, it has been on for several weeks now. People rush to their homes in the evening to ensure that they are not caught violating the curfew timings. I have stayed home for many days now; the curfew timings do not allow me to make a two-way trip to my far-away office. I also realize that staying home is the best guarantee of safety. Outside, one is exposed to dangers: incidents of firings and throwing of grenades in which hundreds of innocent passers-by have died; one has also to face problems created by public demonstrations, protests, and marches, which have become endemic.

For a change, I move out on the porch, and see small children playing. They look happy and unmindful of the bleakness that is plaguing our lives. I watch them intently and am transported into the clean compound of Amirjoo's house—a bumpy, hard, earthy compound, which his servant Khatija would sweep everyday in the morning. The pomegranate trees are full of flaming red blossoms, which guarantee a rich crop, and my share of the ruby-red fruit. That is Amirjoo's promise. His granddaughter Sakina is one of my playmates. Together we mould houses out of wet earth, and think of names for their possible inhabitants. Just then walks in Mamajoo, a sturdy being of large proportions, with a pile of folded clothes on his head. When not working, and fully dressed, he moves about all the time in white churidars and a black sherwani. Then he looks like Shiekh Abdullah: tall, handsome, and graceful. But he is no politician, just a dhobi. He visits all the homes in the mohallah once a week to collect the cast off dirty clothes of their inmates, and brings them back after several days, bright and ironed, in huge but neat piles.

Mamajoo's mother, Sunderded, was truly a beautiful person. She often called me to her large living room, where I sat near a window to watch the big stream full of dongas, in which the hanjis lived with their crowded families. It was a gentle stream, for its water flowed with such slow ease that it looked almost still. During the warm summer days, children thronged its muddy banks; they spent hours playing with water, and throwing handfuls at each other. The teachers of my school often brought us here during the hot summer to help us beat the heat. Because the water in the stream was shallow, it was used like a swimming pool. The big boys, who

were also expert swimmers, would lock their hands to create a rectangular watery space within which the smaller children would try to swim. In spite of my best efforts, I could not learn swimming, but being there was great fun.

Sunderded's room was the airiest room I had ever seen; it had many windows, which would always be open, and fill it with air and light. Did the dhobis have specially-made houses for plying their trade? I once asked my grandfather, and he said no. The compound of Sunderded's house, like ours, was paved with stones. I often hurt myself there, but never in a big way. Whenever I grazed any part of my body or got the flimsiest of scratches, Sunderded cleaned the affected part, rubbed contusions, if there were any, and gave me large cups of boiled milk, with lots of sugar. Milk was considered a safe item of food in a Muslim house by the Pandits, because in those days people of different communities would not generally eat at each other's place, more so the Pandits, because, being too conscious of purity, they feared getting defiled. The Muslims never took it ill. Now people of the two communities eat at each other's place, because it is considered a sign of progressivism, but there is also a lot of hatred between them. In those days it was all love. I would spend lots of time in these two compounds with my playmates.

Mamajoo, though married for long years, had no children of his own, which was sad because this deprived Sunderded of rearing grandchildren. She loved me very much, and often asked my mother to allow me to spend time with her. Time and again she narrated to me stories of her family, how rich they had been, and how, because of ill luck, her son, who should have been the inheritor of a big fortune, was forced

to be a dhobi. But Mamajoo never looked worried by the fall in the fortunes of his family. From his appearance and bearing one could easily make out that he delighted in his work. I would often watch him beating clothes on huge slabs of stone, near the bank of the stream, to make them clean. I don't remember that he ever used any soap on them, but he did something to make them clean, because before slapping them on those slippery and shining slabs, he boiled them in huge cauldrons in his compound. Sunderded was an expert in lighting fires for those pots, which we normally associated with hellish witches.

I spent much of my childhood playing in the compounds of our neighbours, and I loved every moment of it. It never occurred to me then that someday I would have to miss these joys by being sent to school. When my grandfather suggested to my parents one day that I be sent to school, I cried so vehemently and for so long that the idea was given up, at least for some time. But a private tutor, who eventually became our relative, was engaged to teach me at home. Because we had three houses, in which there were many vacant rooms, my grandfather invited him to stay in one of them, to which he agreed. Within a few months, he married my father's youngest sister. Grandfather often told him to thank me for getting a beautiful wife and a ready-made house to live in, for he became a permanent member of our already sprawling family. For me, it worked differently. What was conceived as a temporary expedient turned into a long-term arrangement. The teacher took such keen interest in my studies that almost everybody forgot to put me in school. When I was finally sent there, the headmaster gave me a test and found me good enough for class

seven. This too could have happened only in those days. Nowadays children go to school almost straight from their cradles, and doze off most of their time in their classes.

The children outside are there because the schools are closed. They are free to do whatever they like. Since the parents cannot contain them within the narrow boundaries of their homes for too long, they come out to play in the open space, in spite of the curfew. But they are very alert and agile. Whenever they hear sounds of the movement of vehicles or even of people, they hide behind the small stony pavement, and hold their breath. Poor things, they too are learning to cope with changed times!

22

A very unexpected thing happened today. The vice-chancellor of the University and his personal assistant, who had been kidnapped by the militants just outside the university gate a couple of days ago, were found dead. The state government, which is now directly led by the governor, had refused the militant's plea to release their captured associates in exchange for them. Because of this, almost everybody expected the militants to resort to violence, to give vent to their anger, but nobody imagined that the captives would be killed. There was a good reason for this. Both of them were Muslims; and they had nothing to do with state politics. The VC, in fact, was a pious Muslim and a reputed scholar of Islam; his assistant was a local Muslim who had nothing against the militants. Unfortunately, both were caught in a situation from which there was no exit. The militants

kidnapped them to gain publicity as well as to pressurize the government into accepting their demands for the safe release of their associates. When the government refused to be blackmailed, they resorted to this extreme measure. Letting them off without making any gain would have shown the militants in a poor light. So the VC and his assistant had to become sacrificial goats. I feel sad for them. How they must have suffered during the time they were in captivity!

The VC and his personal assistant are not the only ones who have died at the hands of the militants for no fault of theirs; many others have been killed. Some days back, militants walked into the office of the Deputy Director of Food Control and shot him right in his chair. This happened during the middle of a day, when everybody was in the office, but nobody looked or sounded particularly bothered by what had happened. There was no protest from any quarter, not even a murmur, as if nothing had happened. When people think of themselves as islands and close their eyes to what happens beyond their threshold, oppression grows in its sweep and intensity. That is exactly what is happening in the Valley. When innocent Pandits are killed, people keep quiet. Now Muslims are also killed, and no one looks particularly worried. But there are protests and demonstrations when the security forces kill militants. Fear is spreading like an ever-expanding wave, forcing people to do only what the militants want them to do.

In the wake of the killing of the VC and his assistant, the government has imposed a blanket curfew: non-stop, uninterrupted curfew. It will not be lifted, we are told, till the murderers are apprehended. When I heard the news of their death, I felt demoralized and nakedly vulnerable. In my

frenetic imagination I even visualized myself as the next victim. If the killing of people is a strategy to keep the tempo of the militant activity going, the bell can toll for anybody, even for a small fry like me.

The death of the VC and his assistant moved me deeply. Though I knew neither him nor his assistant, I felt like crying, but, to my horror, I found that no sound came from my mouth. Tears too have dried up, for there have been too many deaths. I clutched at a cigarette and found it helpful. Till evening, I smoked all the cigarettes I had saved so carefully. I forgot about food, and other routine activities. I almost got stuck to where I was. Despondency overtook me in a big way. I felt like going to Bakshis, to see how they were in this hour of crisis. Would he still greet me with his beatific smile? And would his wife be busy in the kitchen making those appetizing steaming parathas?

This time the curfew is just like what it should be. There is not a soul in sight. Even the stray dogs have disappeared. I cannot hear any sounds. The world seems to have come to a standstill.

I don't remember anything about how the day passed. It is dark outside. I go to the kitchen and return to my room. Don't feel like eating. I switch on the radio. The world seems busy with itself. Something or the other is happening everywhere. I get to hear a few lines on the VC and his dreadful death. I also hear that the curfew will continue.

Will the militants continue kidnapping and killing people? If the government has made its intentions clear, then they should stop kidnappings, and only kill. That will be better for the victims.

When will my turn come? My friend, who lives across the river, was here the day before, only to tell me that I should be cautious. "Don't open your door to anybody after dark." I just laughed. "Can't people break open the door or come in through the big window." Instead of countering this, he just repeated that I should do what I have been told. "Don't open your door to anybody." Why should anybody be interested in my door, my house, me? He got irritated and said, "Because you have become a soft target." It was a strange moment, awkward for him, and shocking for me. Sensing that he had probably spoken what he should not have, he told me that militants needed to kill people to keep their movement alive; that forced them to kill whoever was available, including me. What is unusual about it, I thought? Maybe, a closed door could perhaps act as a shield and help postpone the possibility.

The death of the VC has shown that my friend is right. I wonder what is in store for me. If I have to die, how soon could it be? I wish somebody read my horoscope. Somebody reliable, like the one who told my father once that his orders of transfer would be cancelled, and that he would not need to leave the place where he had been posted for many years. The transfer order was actually cancelled; something that had never happened before in his office. I think that all the Pandits should have shown their horoscopes to that expert and then decided whether or not to stay on in the city. Poor VC! Did he have a horoscope? Muslims don't have horoscopes. But I knew a Muslim boy in school who had one, which had been prepared by a learned Pandit. When I asked him about it, he whispered in my ear that everybody in his family had one. This

was a part of their tradition. And I wondered: how many secrets can families harbour?

23

Ranjit is at the door, fairly excited. He enters, hugs me violently, and kisses me on my cheek. He is sorry for having left me alone, and for staying away so long. He was helpless, he says. He went to his hometown, to oversee the maintenance of his apple orchard and attend to a few small jobs, and hoped to return within three or four days but got stuck there because of the long curfew.

Ranjit wants me to believe that he always remembered me, before and after every meal, a time when we would most often meet; he always visualized how lonely I must have been in his absence. I do not need to tell him that what he said was true; he knows it fully well. So he made a kind gesture. He invited me to lunch. Without waiting for my response, he left abruptly. He did not want me to refuse it, even out of politeness.

Ranjit has a compact little house, single-storeyed, with attic rooms for additional space. The living room, in which we sat the whole afternoon, is fully covered with a carpet that he got from Ladakh, with the picture of a fierce-looking dragon spread across its whole length. Sitting at the right-hand corner, I look at it closely, almost in contemplation. My plumber comes to my mind. When I met him last during one of those flight-to-home hours, he looked worried; he had missed working for a whole week, and was now rushing home, for the curfew restrictions were about to start. I asked him about what was happening around us, and what it could end

up in. He wasn't sure, he said. In the beginning, it looked like pointing to a possibility, something like the creation of a new order, but now the turn of events held no promise of any foreseeable change. I see it differently now, he said. Looks like we have put a snake round our neck, which is tightening its grip, and we don't know how to uncoil it. There was no time for further conversation, for we had to part ways. I see Ranjit's dragon growing bigger and bigger.

Do people think like my plumber, I asked Ranjit, who just came out with a steaming bowl of rajmash from the kitchen. He vigorously shook his head to express disagreement, and went back to bring other items of food: pieces of chicken in flaming red curry, saag that he had picked fresh from a patch in the corner of his compound, and boiled rice. We ate a hearty meal. Good food can sometimes work miracles: I forgot snakes and dragons.

After the meal, Ranjit removed things from the room, and sat down by my side to tell me what he had seen and heard in Baramullah. I must say that most of what he told me was just unbelievable. The town was agog with excitement; everybody was keen on making a trip across the border. Duckback shoes, the most commonly used rubber shoes in Kashmir during winter days, sold at a premium because of being ideally suited for going over the hilly and snowy terrain to reach the training camps in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Anyone seen walking on the street wearing such shoes could be stopped, taken to a shoe-shop, and asked to choose a shoe of his choice in exchange for the one he was wearing. This had become such a standard practice that during the whole process, there was no exchange of questions and answers.

Ranjit made it very clear that there was hardly a family in the whole area from which at least one member had not crossed the border. In his village, many people who had gone had not returned yet. All this was quite different from what I had heard from many people around me. It looks like that in rural areas the expectations of people from the activities of militants are very high. Ranjit's version of what people think about militancy is very disturbing, for it points to the continuation of troubled conditions.

Ranjit's version also forces me to think: how can hordes of people cross the border of a country without catching the attention of whoever guards the frontier—border guards, police, security forces? I am sure, I said to him, that somebody must be manning these points of passage. Ranjit smiles and says that a special force is in charge of these places. But they are all human beings like us: ambitious, weak, and opportunistic. They need money. And money is the liquid that lubricates these passages. I found it difficult to make sense of what he was trying to say. Then he said it as baldly as he could. The border, at that moment, was big business. In old days, it was smuggling of goods from one side to another, and now it was of human beings. The difference between the two was that the smuggling of men was more rewarding, for the money required for this operation had touched a new high. But it was no problem for the people, because money was plentifully available.

I felt worried about the country and its security, and tried to share my anxiety with Ranjit. His response was a hearty laugh, suggesting that except for me, or the likes of me, no one was bothered about the country. The thinking of the

people in authority on these things had changed. If the Prime Minister of the country can earn some extra money on the guns that are imported into the country, why can't a security person near the border earn a little bit when there is a chance? And this chance, they know, cannot come again.

After throwing this bombshell, Ranjit gave me more details about the movement of people near the border. It looked like going across was like going to some festival. Nobody felt concerned, and nobody seemed conscious of the risk involved. Because of the pain and anguish that his story caused me, I felt the lunch grow heavy on me. Was Ranjit exaggerating? I know that he revels in making the ordinary look colourful and sensational. Seeing probably the signs of disbelief on my face, he became grim, and swore by his only son that every word of what he had said was true. He had personally met and spoken to individuals who were in charge of collecting people and arranging their passage, but this was meant only for the Muslims.

I was reminded of the words of a Muslim who had spoken to Sunil in his village, when the first signs of militancy had become visible: "You will see that soon we will raise our new army. We are getting our boys trained by our brethren across the border." When Sunil told him that it was his fond dream, because going across was no easy matter, he retorted: "Oye, Batta, what is it that money cannot buy. Every person has a price. We pay the current rate of Rs 200 for the border crossing of every individual." He had laughed and shown him his sack of currency notes collected for the purpose, which he tapped with his fingers, as if it was a drum. At that time, Sunil had

laughed back at him. I am sure, this time Sunil must be at his mercy.

24

Where is Sunil? Where are the Pandits of his village? Where is Shabir? Will this curfew ever come to an end? I liked it in small doses because it provided me with an excuse to stay away from work, insulating me from all possible dangers, from the militants as well as from the security personnel; but now I realize that this continuous, non-stop curfew is also a calamity. Placed as I am on the outermost fringe of the city, I have no idea of what is happening elsewhere. What about the sick and needy? What about women who are about to become mothers? If my mother had come to my father's place for her first pregnancy now, what chances would I have had of being born? The very thought is frightening.

The curfew is also a big barrier between the world outside and me. I have no chance of meeting anybody, no news about my relatives and friends. Only Ranjit manages to come from inside the unexposed lane, avoiding the police that are patrolling the streets. He looks dejected; he cannot go out on his rounds, hear gossip or news. The radio is our sole link with what is happening out there. The killers of the VC have not been apprehended yet, so the curfew will continue.

There have been incidents of firing in some parts of the city because people tried to defy the restrictions on their movement. Such violations of curfew orders have further tightened its noose round our necks, for it is being effected

more vigorously than ever. Scores of people have either been apprehended or arrested. The radio also tells us what is happening in other parts of the world: in Japan, England, and the U.S. Happy people, who live in those countries. Free to do whatever they want. Here we are locked inside our houses and locked in our hearts. Sometimes, though, I feel that this is the best that could happen to us. For, these days, there is no danger of a knock on your door; no danger of a person forcing you to give him protection in your house at gunpoint. There are no raids, no attacks. If the whole Valley is put under curfew for a year or two, it might solve the problem here. But what will the militants do? What will people eat? Do we really need to think of what to eat when our life is threatened? At least, we will live.

The curfew may also become a soft, silent killer. I may perish before some militant gets a chance to add my scalp to his account. The militants, I am told, are ranked now according to the numbers they have killed. Like old-style hunters, who delight in displaying the heads of the animals they have killed. But hunters are no cowards; they are brave, graceful people. They have a code of conduct, which they observe consistently. Do the militants have one? Ask them, not me. An old student of my friend Roshan is a militant now. One day he met him on the road and told him at point blank range, "Run away before I change my mind and finish you off." Poor Roshan. He was shocked, but he did run away. It was no laughing matter. The tables had turned on him. Now his student was in command, and he had to obey. Did Shabir depend on the likes of this militant when he spoke with confidence to Sunil that no harm would be done to him? Are

they the ones who have not allowed the water of affection and consideration to go dry in their eyes? Poor Shabir! I feel for him. But where is Sunil? Whatever happened to his people? Are they too under the protective blanket of this curfew? Or have they already found a place in the swelling accounts of the militant registers?

I want to make a short prayer for everybody: for Sunil, for his brethren, for people who are suffering because of this curfew, for everybody. What about the militants? I ask myself. And I make no reply. These days I have no fear of militants, so no thoughts about them. Neither good nor bad. What if they have finished off Sunil? God help me and give me sleep. I am too tired even for rambling thoughts.

25

The curfew is a great teacher. I am learning new things. How to be patient with oneself, how not to fall sick, how to live without depending on shops and stores? I have ransacked all the pots, pans, containers big and small, for whatever they contained. I have learnt how to make chappatis, prepare gruel and soups, and experiment with new mixtures of solids and liquids. Kitchen gardens can be very useful during these times. I make pakoras of yellow gourd flowers, even of white ones, although that is not usually done, soups from freshly plucked corn and soups of mixed vegetables. I have become an innovator of sorts.

Curfew also stimulates dreams—dreams of longing and desire. Yesterday I dreamed of Sunil and his associates. I do not remember whether they were in their village or at some

other place, but they certainly were there: solid-looking beings, but with sealed tongues. I tried to speak to them. I repeated every word I spoke several times, to make sure that they heard me. It seemed that they did; they even understood me, for they looked like making an attempt to say something to me in response, but no sounds came from their open mouths. Their vocal chords had probably snapped. They had lost the power of speech. Their faces were bright and their clothes new and colourful, as if in readiness for making some pleasant trip. I awoke with a shudder. I do not know what to make of this dream. Have they been reduced to submission? Are they still alive and in the same village? I closed my eyes to get back to them, but in vain. All I managed to see was dark blackness. I cannot forget their beautiful clothes, because these I associated with angels in my childhood.

After some time, and without wishing it, I dreamed of Girija. She looked happy, in some far away garden, with an unwavering smile on her lips. Then I saw her waving at me. I tried to go near her, and to ask her about her plans of returning to our home. But strange things were happening there. The more I walked towards her, the more she went away from me. She looked like a receding wave, which always eludes. How attractive her smile was! I tried to focus on it, to understand its import. Was it of welcome? Did it suggest some message, some direction? I tried very hard, but could not make out anything. Had I grown so dull that I couldn't read even my wife's smile? I renewed my effort. Suddenly, she transformed into our children. They were waving at me, welcoming me, but no words came from their pretty mouths. I tried to go near them, but, like what had happened earlier,

they looked like receding. Were they dream children? I tried to concentrate again. They were there, my very own children, but they were so still, like wax models. Healthy-looking children with bright, cheerful faces and a smile on their lips. I woke up again. I felt that my dreams were half-baked. Was it because I was hungry that they could not become real enough? If only I could speak to Girija and ask her what I should do: stay on here or join her. All means of communication between us have dried up. Even the dreams have failed me.

What has become of my life? I am struggling to survive, to keep breathing. Like one long trial, pointing to nothing. If my friend Arvind were here, he would have been delighted by my experiential wisdom, for he had found 'nothingness,' even when he had everything. Where is he now? Has he too flown away, like so many of my relatives, friends, and companions? Or has he found a place in the balance sheet of the militants? Maybe he is still here. This would be no hour of trial for him, for his best hours are spent in his quilt. These days he must be having a whale of a time: concentrating on the point of nothingness from the comfort of his 'quilty' days and nights. From here, Arvind seems as distant as the other world.

26

The curfew is still on. The radio reports peoples' protest against what they call their interminable captivity. There is no trace of the murderers of the VC and his assistant. I don't think the local police, who have been entrusted with this job,

can ever find them. Ranjit has told me time and again what the local police are like. He is certain that if they really wanted it, they could have put all the militants and their sympathisers behind the bars in no time. After all, who are these militants? People who have grown up with them, and eaten with them; many of them are their relatives and friends. But the local police, who have sympathy for them, do not want to risk their lives needlessly. The police force that has been brought from outside the state is not effective, because they neither know the place nor understand the local language. So nothing can really happen. Ranjit says the members of Parliament in New Delhi are worried about the resentment that is building against the government. The governor, in fact, has been severely censured for his action, but he is adamant. He wants the common people to help him restore peace in the Valley by reporting against their brethren. Will they? Even if they wish to, they cannot. They are afraid, because the gun in the hands of the militants is a big scare. Hundreds of people have been killed brutally, because they were suspected to be informers. I mean genuine informers, not like the Pandits, for whom it is just a label.

We are in the grip of a vicious circle. I am not sure if it can be broken. There are rumours that the governor might be removed. But I don't think a mere change of a governor will make any difference. There is a severe lack of a proper policy on what is to be done. People who are giving statements and making noise are not even sure of what the problem is. The most ironical part of the current situation is that even those who are active in the movement are not sure of what it is all about. That is why there are too many versions, too many

ideological positions, and too many strategies. Every person who wants to say something is using the conditions to his advantage. The result of it all, as Ranjit says, is more misery for the common people. The shopkeeper outside my home told me last week that there was a time when the shop helped him earn money for his sustenance; now he feeds on it. Very soon, he will eat its walls, too.

Another neighbour of mine, who has risen from a low position to one of affluence, regrets that the "revolution" has started at the wrong time. He had just about started experiencing some comfort in his life, and has now to live with this calamity. Most of these complaints circulate privately and do not make it to the surface, for people fear to articulate them publicly. The result is that their truth, which far outweighs the truth that is spread through pamphlets and slogans, never gains ascendancy. In the course of time, I am sure, it will be reduced to a memory: a hazy, nebulous, and about-to-vanish memory. The voice of the common sufferers will be submerged forever. Some day, it may adorn the tale of some old person, who might narrate it to his young grandchildren, but it will never be taken seriously. What the people will discover later will be the untruth of the statements of the politicians and all kinds of leaders--real and self-styled—and their written versions. These alone will form the basis of knowing what happened. Unfortunate, but true.

The leaders who articulate the spirit of the movement, which is backed by the militants, move about in cars to remind the people of the sacrifices they have to make for the "cause." The shopkeeper outside my home, my unhappy neighbour, and the starving family of Nazir, and God knows how many

more people are making sacrifices in their own humble way, putting in their bit of the mite, facing hardships and hunger. But will they get anything in return? Will they even find a place in the roster of the martyrs? Ranjit would have laughed it off in his cynical way. In what part of the world have the common people, who sacrificed their everything for whatever cause they were told to work for, featured in such lists? Common people are like ordinary soldiers. They have just to fight, and not hope for rewards. For, rewards are parts of one's destiny. You will get only as much as is written in your fate.

But what is my fate? Where do I stand? My brethren have pushed me to the fringes of vulnerability. If I leave the place because I feel threatened, for am I not being constantly reminded that I should quit the place, then I am a traitor. If I stay on, then I am a suspect, an agent of the enemy. If I still stay on by braving the threats and the finger of suspicion raised at me, then I am an outcast, a hanger-on, and an object of derision. What have I done to deserve this fate? Sunil would have said: your birth. You were born a Pandit; that is why you have to suffer. That is your fate. In the new political lexicon of the Muslims, your entry has been erased to create a congenial space for a new sociopolitical order. So you have to go. Would anybody consider my going a sacrifice on my part? No, it is just not possible. Some people are destined not to merit a reward.

I have decided that I will not go, come what may. Even if I die unheard and unsung, and do not figure anywhere, I will still die in the land of my own people. Own people! But who are your people? You have already become a stranger in your own place. Even if you leave this place, people in the rest

of the country will not bother about you. If you are not recognized in the place of your birth, where else can you hope to be? You have already attained the state of invisibility: here, there, everywhere.

If I cannot find anything outside, then I better be here, even if it means courting death. Oh, death, come and wash me with your balmy breath, if you dare!

27

The curfew has finally been lifted. The governor had to relent because of too many pressures. As was expected, the killers of the VC have not been found. Perhaps they will never be found, although everybody knows that they are right here, in houses and families known to many people. The lifting of the curfew has generated a festive air, though it looks out of place in the circumstances we are in. The streets are full of people and noise; everybody is on the road, celebrating another kind of release.

Ranjit is at my door. He wants me to come out and do shopping, to buy foodstuffs and other things. I tell him that we go to see the Kauls, and he agrees. In about fifteen minutes we reach this small pocket of Pandits, who, we knew, were there till the curfew overtook us all. This entire locality was once a big orchard. The owner cut the trees, divided the land into small plots and sold them to individual buyers, to create a new locality. Most of the localities in this part of the city have been made like this. The trees are disappearing, to make way for new habitations.

The Kauls are an old couple, the family friends of Girija's

parents. They are there because they have nowhere else to go. Their only son lives with his wife and children in some other part of the country, and they have no contact with him. Kaul says that he was bought by his wife's parents for a song and is now their property. This is his way of saying that his son fell in love with the woman he married and paid a price for it. She did not ask for money or ornaments, as he had expected, but something unusual: she told him to forget that he was born to his parents. And it seems he did. That is why the Kauls are there. I was on the verge of asking them if they had any plans for leaving the place, but refrained from doing so. This would have opened up wounds in their lacerated hearts. When I, therefore, asked them the routine question of how things were with them, I expected their usual response of "as good as they can be." But this time, their response was different.

Kaul said that the whole block of Pandits in the locality was severely shaken because of what befell the daughter of one of their neighbours. Both of us were shocked and surprised. When I asked him whose daughter, he said, "Raina's daughter." I knew Raina's daughter very well. Tall, fair, and graceful, she was one of the most beautiful girls I had ever seen. Just before the curfew had been clamped on the city, Raina's daughter, Sanjana, who worked as a teacher in a school in a far off village, had had a nightmarish experience.

When Sanjana reached her school on that dreadful day, all her colleagues looked at her piteously, for three people were waiting for her in the staff room. All the other teachers in the school were Muslims; they either felt powerless or were unwilling to do anything to save her. When she entered the main office to sign her name in the school register, the three

persons waiting there beckoned her to follow them. She was taken by surprise, but did not show it, for she had been told much earlier by her colleagues that if people wanted to speak to her, she should not hesitate to respond.

They took her to a room normally used for storing junk—broken chairs, tables, blackboards, and torn mats—and made her sit on one of the rickety chairs. Standing around her, all of them asked her questions, exactly in the manner in which the spies are questioned in Hindi films. Their very mode of asking them and their body movements had a comic air about them. They asked her what she knew of the plans that they firmly believed had been prepared to eliminate them. Having met them for the first time, Sanjana told them that she had no knowledge of any plan against them. Since they did not expect her to be ignorant, they considered her a tough nut that needed to be cracked differently, so they tried other methods to break her resistance and to force her to speak. They flashed a powerful light in her face, which almost blinded her. One of them hurled a glass of water in her face with such great force that she uttered an anguished cry. Although she experienced a great deal of pain, she did not say anything to them because she had nothing to tell.

In spite of her avowals that she knew nothing about the things they were asking her, they continued to pester her with questions. For a moment, she even felt amused by it all, but her tormentors were deadly serious about what they were doing. They were sure that she was a top agent of a big organization, which was working against the mujahids, and that she was in the know of several dangerous plans to finish them. When she told them that she really did not know

anything about the kind of things they thought she knew, and that she was really surprised by what they were expecting from her, they got infuriated. They became ruthless; they hurled abuse at her, slapped her, and even threatened her with dire consequences if she did not spill all that she knew. Poor Sanjana, who knew nothing except chemistry, the subject she had studied and taught in the school, did not know how to save herself from this ordeal. Her helplessness made her cry, and the more she cried, the more cruelly they treated her. Then they assaulted her; they twisted her arms, hit her face, and then used another weapon of the interrogator; they singed her tender skin with burning cigarettes. That was when she passed out.

Sanjana has no memory of what happened after that. When she regained consciousness, she found herself in another room in a dilapidated chair with nobody around. She cried for help, but found that she could hardly speak. When she shouted at the top of her voice to produce a weak, muffled call, two women staff members came in to tell her not to make any noise. They helped her move out of the school after everybody had left and told her to go home and not to attend school for some days; they assured her that her salary would be paid to her there. When Sanjana tried to get up, she found that her legs were cramped. There were black and blue marks on her arms, and burnt patches on her legs. She was not sure of what her face looked like. When she asked her colleagues what it was all about, they signalled that she better not open her lips.

When Sanjana managed to reach her home after great difficulty, her father gave a loud cry, and the paralyzed frame of her bed-ridden mother shook in grief. In her youth, the

mother had been very beautiful and an active person, but now everything in her was dead except her eyes. Her husband had learnt to understand the language of her eyes, for she expressed all her needs through them.

Sanjana's father saw that her mother's eyes were a picture of pain. He told the Kauls later that her eyes clearly expressed to him that Sanjana was paying heavily for her mother's condition. Though he had all along opposed the idea of leaving the city, he sent for his friend, who lived nearby, and asked him to arrange a taxi for leaving the place at the earliest possible moment. They left in the early hours of the next morning, leaving behind everything they had. They were so desperate to leave the place as early as they could and so disgusted with what had happened to Sanjana that they had no heart to take anything with them. Her father did not want another invalid in his house.

When Kaul finished his account of Sanjana's travails, Ranjit and I were in tears. Her father had wanted that his wife, the victim of a terrible disease, should not be forced to leave the city. She had made it clear to him several times that she wanted to die in the city of her birth. But seeing her daughter's condition, she urged them to leave at once. She did not want to expose her to any more bodily harm. She knew how the militants had sawed one Pandit girl, a schoolteacher like Sanjana, into two pieces, as if she was no more than a log of wood.

Sanjana and her parents have left. So have thousands of others, for one reason or the other. And the world goes on. Is there anybody to speak for the likes of her? Any so-called human rights organizations. They are interested only in

knowing how many terrorists are in prison, the kind of food they are provided, and how many of them have died because of the negligence of the prison officials. The likes of Sanjana do not figure in their priorities. The victims of terrorist violence are born only to suffer. Sanjana's plight has so shaken the entire locality that everybody there is packed for going. The curfew had come in their way.

The Kauls will also make a move, for they do not want to risk the wrath of self-styled liberators the number of whose organizations, according to one rough estimate, has already crossed one hundred. How many can one possibly hope to escape, especially when the groups vie with each other for attention? Ranjit cannot help telling me another Sanjana-like story: more gruesome, more ghastly.

28

Once upon a time, in a distant village of the Valley, there lived two friendly families, belonging to different communities. Their first children were girls, whose names began with the same letter, and were called Sarla and Sarah. Whether this was a coincidence or a deliberate decision made by the parents of the two girls, we do not know, but it is true that they played in each other's compound, sang the same songs, and grew up to go to school together. After finishing school, they became teachers in the newly opened school of their village. Many people say that they did this to be near each other, which further strengthened their bonds of friendship.

The villagers too liked and appreciated having teachers from within their own people. This was an occasion for

celebration and joy. In due course, the two also got married, and shared the new joys of conjugal life and motherhood. Their love and affection for each other and their concern for each other's welfare touched legendary proportions. They were sisters in true sense of the word, everybody would say, and their regard and concern for each other would be quoted as an example. But now such solid bonds of affection and trust became the prime targets of the fundamentalist wave, which spread fast throughout the length and breadth of the Valley. Sarah hardly knew that the wave had already touched the fringes of her home.

One day Sarah was surprised by her brother, when he told her somewhat abruptly, "If you want to ensure that we succeed in our aim of what you must already know by now, you will have to help us by changing your attitude towards Sarla." Sarah was aghast. All she could manage to speak was "Hai, Allah! How can this be possible? Sarla is more than a blood sister to me." But her brother was equal to the occasion; he saw to it that she did not push him aside. "Our cause demands big sacrifices. Can't you do even this little bit?" Slowly but steadily, her brother broke her wall of resistance, by feeding her daily with doses of new education, till she became a staunch convert.

Poor Sarla, she did not know that her sister was turning into a sister of the millat, and had forsaken the religion of humanity for the new religion of separatism, which was based on hate and ill will for those who were not a part of your fold. She little knew that when evil finds a hospitable place, it flourishes as much in our hearts as in big fields of battle. Sarla continued to share her confidences with Sarah about her

husband, her children, and about herself. But she began to realize that Sarah was no longer lively and frolicsome as she had always been in the past. When Sarla expressed anxiety about her changed bearing, she explained it away tactfully, as something related to a crisis within her family.

Sarah ensured that her changed behaviour did not lead to any change in her relations with Sarla, because the burdens of the millat were growing on her. She had been expressly told by her brother to maintain contact with her at any cost, even against her wishes, because they had to ensure that they retained links with her husband, who was an important official in the telecommunications department. They thought that he could help them to have access to some valuable information. Subsequent events revealed that there was a touch of exaggeration in their belief that there was a large-scale transmission of secret information which was directed against them between various agencies in the state and the centre. So Sarah maintained her posture of friendliness so skillfully that Sarla could not see through it. But the secret of Sarah's success, although it proved to be no success in the end, as people were to comment later on, was not as much in Sarah's ability to hide things as in Sarla's unflinching faith in her sister. She had always thought that her bond with her was a sacred one, which was inviolate, and would not admit of any change. That is why she stayed put in her village, though many people from her community had fled the place. Everybody in the village knew that with Sarah there, nobody would even dare to touch her.

One day, Sarah's brother thought that he had got the clue he was waiting for; he alerted his group to act on his plan. They waited outside Sarah's home for Sarla to come out,

waylaid her at a secluded corner of the street, and took her to an unknown destination. When it became known, it was big news, but nobody could believe that she would have to put up with such an eventuality. According to the plan, Sarah went to Sarla's husband, to inform him that she had information of her kidnappers and that she would help rescue her from there. Without thinking even for a minute, for such was the trust between them, Sarla's husband went with her to a hideout, where Sarla had been kept as a decoy to entice him.

When Sarla understood the import of it all, that she and her husband had been betrayed, she became mad and hurled abuse at Sarah and everybody else there. Her rage and fury, and the spirit with which she hurled imprecations at everybody, was too much for her kidnappers. Right in the presence of her husband, they raped her violently, cut off her breasts, and stilled her fiery rage. Forced to watch it all, her husband turned into a defiant stone, and refused to answer the questions of his tormentors. They tried all the weapons in their armoury, but failed to force open his mouth. In sheer desperation, they pounded him to death. The two died to create a new legend of love and betrayal, faith and treachery.

Life, in these parts, they say, has never been the same again. Sarah's brothers were frustrated because they did not gain anything from what they did. Though several people commended Sarah for the work she did for the millat, she is not the same person that people knew before this incident. She has become a recluse and rarely moves out of her home.

29

Terrorism has shown us a hitherto unknown face of human nature. I know when a murder took place in the city during my college days, it created a big sensation; nobody believed that such a thing could possibly happen in the peaceful environs of our place. For several weeks, everybody talked about it endlessly. When it was found that the foul act had been the work of an outsider, a non-Kashmiri, everybody heaved a sigh of relief.

The most ferocious quarrels between people in our society have been generally verbal ones. This probably explains why the Kashmiri language has a rich and untranslatable store of abusive terms. If people ever went to the extent of taking it out on each other physically, they resorted to a wrestler's grip, clasped each other's arms, clashed with brows, growled like snarling beasts, and, finally, showered the choicest invectives on each other. If things got worse, there would be an exchange of a couple of blows. During winter days, people took out kangris from their pherans and showered the smouldering fire therein at each other. Invariably, the fighters were caught by the onlookers and disengaged. But now, people use pistols and guns, and trade both abuse and bullets. We have also created walls of hatred between communities. How sad that it is seen as a mark of our growing consciousness as political and religious beings.

It is true that in very early times, when Islam spread its wings in the Valley, brutal atrocities were committed in the name of religion. We have several eyewitness' accounts of how people were put to sword because they refused to be converted

to the new faith. But during the time I grew up, I did not see such acts of violence. Perhaps to compensate for this, now we are witnessing nothing but violence.

Is this violence a resurgence of the early militant phase of Islam, some kind of atavistic reawakening, or is it something new? My friends in the Valley say that it is a new Pan-Islamic awareness, for Muslims are now dreaming of controlling the entire world, and they want to enforce their authority wherever they are in a majority. I sometimes wonder, though, what will the faith gain by raising its might against a handful of Pandits?

Our communist friends in New Delhi explain it in purely secular terms. It is no religious war, they say; it is the downtrodden rising up against the classes which have been dominating the entire population of the Muslims. Even some ministers in the cabinet, who are busy trying to understand the problem in the Valley, believe in this. Why wouldn't the Muslims take up arms when they found that the Pandits had all the jobs? I pity these people who not only suffer from poverty of thinking but are also dangerously irresponsible; because far from solving the problem, they are only fanning the fires of hatred and discord. Take the case of our veteran leader, George Fernandes, who is a special minister for Kashmir affairs. He visited the city several times during the past few weeks, met hundreds of Muslims, and gave statement after statement that the community was aggrieved because they were inadequately represented in the services. People like him should have known that Sheikh Abdullah and the chief ministers who followed him had devised a special preferential policy for the Muslims, because of which jobs could not have

gone to the Pandits. The fact is that they have no clout in the government, neither in the state nor in the centre. If Fernandes had seen this obvious reality in Kashmir, then he would have looked for the reasons of the current problem elsewhere, in the resurgence of the militant phase of Islam. The sad truth is that most people in the government do not see beyond their nose. Many do not see even that far.

If only the successive governments in Jammu and Kashmir had laid the basis of a society that was governed by justice and fair play, and the huge funds the state got from the centre had been invested in fruitful and purposeful ventures, the condition of the general public would have been far better than what it is now. Perhaps they would also not have shown the kind of resistance to the government in position as they do now; even the attractiveness of the new power of the faith would not have caused such a wholesale disruption in human lives.

What actually happened in the state was that successive governments organised influential groups of supporters around them who, in the course of time, created an umbrella of people with vested interests who enjoyed the fruits of power and became prosperous at the cost of the common people. While in power, they strongly supported the status quo. Once out of it, they turned into its bitter critics and opponents. The leaders of Kashmir have played this game to keep themselves in the public eye. Whenever the governments in power found it necessary, they reminded the public at large that the state's connection with the Indian union was both limited and provisional. As it always happens, the common people let themselves be swindled.

Once again, the politicians have been sufficiently exposed, but, surprisingly, and I must also say intriguingly, the anger of the public is not directed against the leaders who hoodwinked them all these years, but against the state apparatus and the poor Pandits, who at no time had enough numbers even to win an assembly seat on their own. In the absence of any institutionalised structures that could channel and absorb their resentment in a constructive way, the people took to the thinking and violent ways proposed by the new order of the militants.

30

At long last, Sunil is back. He looks thin and worried. When I asked him about the situation in his village in the post-Pir era, he said there was no significant change, except that the Pandits were ready to leave any moment. But there had been aggravation from another quarter: through Shamji's son-in-law, Ashok, who had been there for several days to see his wife and children.

When Ashok returned to his home, where he lived with his mother and two brothers, he found the atmosphere unusually tense. The security forces had trapped and killed some militants who had been trying to cross into Kashmir from the Pakistani border. The news had spread fast, resulting in protests at almost every place. When Ashok entered his home, his mother was not happy to see him, for she dreaded the new vengeful fire in people's eyes, which they always took out on Pandits who had been away from their homes for some days. Within minutes, a Muslim neighbour's son came in to

tell Ashok that some people wanted to see him at the nearby shop of the tailor, whom he knew quite well. Before his mother could think of something to prevent him from leaving the place, he was gone; all she could do was to wring her hands with anxiety.

The tailor greeted Ashok cordially and asked him why he had not been seen for some days. Ashok told him that he had gone to see his wife and his children. Just when he was about to ask him why he wanted to see him, he saw two youths walking towards the shop. Their eyes met the eyes of the tailor and something passed between them. In a flash, Ashok understood the import of that exchange and ran towards his home. He had barely covered some distance when one of them fired at him. Bleeding profusely, he fell into his mother's expectant arms; she knew something unusual was to happen, so she had been waiting for him. She had also worked out a possible plan to meet any eventuality.

Walking up to the nearest police post, she asked for help to carry him to the hospital. The officers in the police station wasted a lot of her precious time in completing what they called the required formalities. It was only when she drew their attention to the blood that was flowing from the wound of her son that they showed some urgency, and provided her with two policemen and a vehicle, in which they proceeded towards the city. He was conscious till they were about to enter the city, assuring her all the time that he would survive. He requested the policemen to take him to the military hospital, where he knew he would get prompt attention, but they refused. In a harsh and angry tone they said that they had no authority to do so and turned the vehicle in the

direction of the road that led to the government hospital.

Ashok closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and whispered to his mother to resign herself to the wishes of the Almighty. He was least hopeful of his survival because he knew that the doctors in government hospitals were reluctant even to touch the victims of militant violence though they promptly attended to people who were injured in police firing.

He was admitted to the Emergency ward, but no doctor came to attend on him. Even the desperate wails of his mother did not prove of any avail. Seeing that Ashok was sinking, she took his head in her lap and poured forth her tears on his lifeless face.

Like a statue of grief, Ashok's mother returned to her home with the dead body of her son and sent word to her daughter-in-law about what had happened. When it reached Shamji's house, he collapsed even before his daughter could cry out her grief. As if this was not enough, the police came to pester them every day by asking them pointless questions about Ashok's stay with them: what was he doing in the village before he returned to his home, and, amusingly, whether his relations with his wife were cordial or not? Several groups of them visited Shamji's home everyday, giving them a vulnerable visibility. One could hear the Muslims say openly that he would be the cause of their undoing, for the security forces from the outside, who had also come to investigate the killing, would harass every other person of the village. Shamji felt so troubled and worried by such taunts, which grew louder day by day, that he was forced to leave his home in the village. Sunil had to help him to go to Jammu.

"What about the rest of the people of the village," I asked him. "They are all ready" was his short reply. Shamji's plight forces me to think. How many more Pandits have to leave the valley for one reason or the other?

31

I just cannot get Ashok out of my mind. He was married five years ago on a beautiful spring day. I remember him distinctly in that big car, decked out with multi-coloured flowers, along with a number of small-sized buses, which carried a large group of baraatis. The little procession, which halted outside Shamji's compound near the small stream, looked like a small painting. For in the backdrop of the low hills, tall poplars, and the gentle morning sun, it was like a scene on a wide canvas.

Ashok's dress was a compromise between the old and the new styles. In olden days, bridegrooms wore a long sherwani, buttoned right up to the neck, a white churidar, and a saffron-coloured turban. But now grooms wear English-style suits with matching ties, brown shoes, for black ones are considered inauspicious, and a turban of heavy silk or brocade sari. Ashok looked a handsome bridegroom, for he was well built and fair, and walked with dignity and grace. He wore a light cream-coloured suit, a polka-dotted tie, a turban made out of a Banarasi silk sari which had a light grey base and crimson border. The border formed the outward layer of his turban, and that was quite fetching. The car in which he occupied the front seat was packed with small children. One of them carried in his hand an opened-up umbrella, its outer surface fully

covered with layers of multi-coloured flowers, for the bridegroom was supposed to walk towards the home of the bride under a protective canopy.

His movement was announced by the blowing of a conch, which stirred the household of the bride into a flurry of activity. Men, old and young, lined the route the bridegroom had to take, and women formed a group to sing soft melodious songs of welcome. The bridegroom was followed by the baraatis. Since it was a village wedding, there was a lot of festive noise and the participation of the people in receiving the guests and taking care of their comfort was unbelievably high. I was there by a happy coincidence and got invited to the wedding feast because my friend Sunil was one of the chief organisers.

Poor Ashok, he is no more, consumed by the fires of hate and distrust. How absurd it is even to think that his visit to the place where he came as a bridegroom is interpreted as the secret mission of a professional spy!

32

It was another late autumn day in November, somewhat chilly, in my old home, which is different from the one where I was born. The morning was cold, for the haze was still hanging around, and the earth was wet with cold vapour, but everyone was up and about. There was a big feast yesterday. Hundreds of men had their morning meal with dainty preparations of meat cooked by over a dozen professional cooks under the watchful, expert eyes of my uncle. The feast in the morning was followed by another one in the

evening which was exclusively for women. And what a crowded party it turned out to be! It seemed that everybody in our large extended family had invited everybody known to him or her.

The evening meal was followed by a series of ceremonial acts. I was given a bath, and henna was pasted on my hands to herald an auspicious start to my married life. All the elderly women sang songs in the traditional manner, in which every detail of the ritual was instantly converted into a musical line and sung in a slow rhythm. After every line of the song, they touched my forehead with several varieties of aromatic substances, and burnt them in a kangri, producing a heady aroma that spread throughout the room. It was followed by a profusion of kisses on different parts of my face and with love-laden blessings for my happy future. All of it was so touching. My mother and all my aunts from her side and my father's side and numerous other elderly relatives handled me with such tenderness that I was moved to tears. Then all the women, but mostly the younger ones, the beautiful ones—for there is no lack of beautiful women in our family—relatives, friends, and all the sweet and charming girls, friends of my sisters, cousins, and neighbours, formed a circle and sang the traditional ditties, followed by the current and popular film songs, but appropriate to the occasion, to the accompaniment of an assortment of traditional musical instruments. There was not much artistry in their singing but a lot of goodwill and affection, which has unfortunately passed out from our lives. Those were days of love, affection, fellow feeling and unbelievable bonds of intimacy. The night swayed to the music of the singers, and gradually changed into the morning.

In the midst of all this, my grandfather was the busiest man around, for his first grandson was getting married. He woke everyone up. Menfolk got busy shaving, washing, and wearing new clothes, and women too with their elaborate toilets and endless talk. Grandfather tied a saffron-coloured turban on my head, pushed in a golden pin at its main front-fold, and feeling satisfied with his effort and the way it looked on me, he planted a huge kiss on my forehead. All the older women, who were not supposed to join the marriage procession, improvised songs for the occasion. Another round of incense-burning was followed by a great deal of noise and commotion. When I was fully ready, everyone came in to see how I looked as a bridegroom. Seeing it all, Grandfather's eyes became moist and his voice was heavy with emotion. When my parents came in, to hug me and to bless me, my mother had tears streaming down her cheeks. All my uncles and aunts, some of whom had come from other parts of the country, trooped in to repeat the ritual. It was a great feeling to receive so much love and affection and to be the centre of everybody's attention.

Nura, my godmother, the one who helped me come into the world, her husband, and their children were also there as very special guests. Time had sent us asunder, to different parts of the city, but we had maintained contact. Nura gave me a fond look, as if trying hard to accept and believe that the infant who had messed up her pheran had grown big enough to get married, kissed me all over, and congratulated every member of my family one by one. I sometimes marvel how slowly time moved in those days. We could do it all and still feel no hurry. So many of my new Muslim neighbours and friends showered coins and small sweet bonbons on me,

and children scrambled to get as many of them as they could.

Then I moved into the big compound of our home, and I was made to stand on a beautifully made rangoli. One by one, my relatives and friends put round my neck garlands made of yellow flowers, freshly plucked, of dried flowers of exquisite colours, of cardamom, and of currency notes of different denominations, for that was one of the latest inventions of the traders who looked after the business of producing embellished bridegrooms. The flower-decked umbrella with which he dutifully protected my head wherever I went was in the hands of my cousin. All the women, young and old kissed me on my forehead and sang the songs appropriate to the occasion. Some were improvised particularly to lend a comic touch to the proceedings, for spreading mirth and joy.

Finally, to the accompaniment of conch-shells, singing, music, and noise, and amidst also a great deal of confusion, with people shouting and running about, I was taken out of the house, to take my seat in a motor car which was covered with rows of variegated flowers and colourful balloons. My younger brothers and sisters were dressed in their best, and my dear father looked particularly smart and handsome. Since my grandfather had assumed the role of the main impresario, my father looked like my elder brother, so happy and content with the way in which things were happening. Lots of people had come to see me, and most of them stayed to accompany me to the bride's place, so a cavalcade of cars and taxis followed the motor car carrying me.

In a short time, we reached the bride's home, where we stopped just outside the main gate. When the blowing of the conch-shell announced my arrival, there was a great

commotion there. Relatives and friends of the bride's family lined the beautifully decorated entrance to receive us and the rays of the morning sun glowed on everything there. After a few moments, I was brought out of the car, to the loud blare of the conch-shell and also the traditional songs sung by the relatives of the bride, and, once again, I was put on the rangoli.

Then the bride came accompanied by several of her young friends, draped in a rustling silk sari, and wrapped up in a shawl of exquisite needlework, with her face completely covered by the sari. My mother-in-law came with a thali of small-lighted lamps made of kneaded flour, and an assortment of sweets. After kissing me, the way my mother had done it in my home, she made Girija and me eat from the same piece of sweet a couple of times. Then somebody from her side, perhaps one of her comely aunts, lifted the drooping sari from her face and the cameras flashed and clicked to capture the moment. After this, she was taken in, but I remained to stay for another short puja outside the main door of the house. This was followed by a short break, after which I was taken in.

In a specially decorated room, Girija and I sat for a long puja, through a major part of the day, with little breaks in between, to the accompaniment of mantras recited in Sanskrit, meant to unite us into a new bond of companionship. The most interesting part of the puja, which I remember even now, was when a red shawl of beautiful needlework with a golden thread was spread over both of us like a canopy, held by people at its four edges. Most of the elderly people congregated round us to shower flowers, while the priests recited shlokas.

When finally my Grandfather accepted Girija as a gift from her father to be treasured with love and affection, I could hear

his voice quivering with emotion. That, he told me later, was the moment when there was a visible change in the girl; she would be transformed. It sounded quite unusual to me, but this, he said in his inimitable style, was the magic of the moment. I would not have believed it if I had not remembered that such beliefs of transformation existed in many other societies.

Just after this, when it dawned on everyone that Girija had entered the new fold, several people, especially her parents and her uncles and aunts from her father's and mother's side, were in tears and their voice had a sad tinge to it. A would-be-wife had to leave her parents, break off her association with them and prepare herself to get into a new role. My mother-in-law was to tell me later that the secret of a girl's successful future in her husband's house lay in her capacity to understand the true significance of this moment. And I did see it happen, almost like a miracle, when Girija became my wife. Within days she owned everything that was in my home, and her ties with her parents and her brothers and sisters changed. Whenever she talked of things in our home, she always used the words 'our's,' but whenever she made any reference to her parents and her brothers and sisters, she always used the word 'their's,' although only a few days back, she was a part of it and it was all 'our's' then. When I expressed surprise over it, Girija talked like a wise matron and said that it was a part of woman's destiny which I, being a man, would never understand.

Girija, do you realize that at this time I am alone here? Do you even remember that I am here? Where are you? Why don't you speak to me in my dreams? Perhaps you cannot, because

the smoke of terror has already submerged even my dreams. The only dreams I get now are about knocks on the door. Perhaps it is because of Surinder. He always tells me: "Beware of a knock! Don't open the door! It could mean the very end of all knocks." Why don't I hear it during the day, and get over it?

33

Sunil is here again. Fate has cast him in a new role now. Earlier I thought of him as a tragic figure, not because he had been cast in the heroic mould, but because his aspiration to be a happily married man and a proud father had been thwarted by the cruel hands of fate. But now, in these difficult times, he has been forced to act the part of a messenger—to bring in the news of deaths. I remember Sunil telling me at one time that the Greek playwrights did not show violence or death on the stage; these were reported. They wanted the audience to be moved by the news of a person's death without making it look gruesome and messy. Now Sunil is acting his part quite well.

This time, Sunil's account was so brutal that I began to doubt that the terrorists killed people only for spreading terror. Surely, the guns in their hands have turned them into paranoids. It is difficult to accept that they could think of every Pandit as a spy who needed to be eliminated brutally. The militants have been most ruthless with Pandits who left the valley temporarily to return to their homes. Ranjit has already told me about two of them who were eliminated by the terrorists just because they had gone to Jammu for a few days,

to meet their friends and relatives. They ensure this by stopping buses coming into the city from Jammu at the main entry point and catching them right there, as if Jammu only produces ammunition for the destruction of the people who use guns in Kashmir to kill others.

This time Sunil's story relates to someone from Anantnag, the granary of Kashmir, a district full of lush-green fields and fruit orchards, which falls in the route from Jammu to Srinagar. And this is the tragic story of Shamboonath.

Shamboonath was a widely respected man of his village, which was about fifteen miles away from the main town. He had spent his entire life as a teacher in government schools; teaching for him was not just a means of earning his living, but a passion. He was widely known in his village and in many nearby villages for his manifold contributions in the field of education, and people always addressed him as Masterji.

Because of the zamindari reforms, he had to part with more than half of his arable land, as it was in excess of the new limit of the holdings fixed by the government. So he tried his hand at farming, too, for he could retain control of whatever little was left to him only if he cultivated it himself. Since he had already retired, he spent a lot of his time on his land, which kept him fruitfully occupied. It also brought him other gains, which revealed yet another facet of his personality. Living in the midst of nature for long hours, he experienced the joys of being a farmer, and composed songs about the intimate bond between man and nature. All the village people considered him a noble person of exemplary qualities—kind, helpful, and affectionate. But in troubled times, when the air

is rife with suspicion and hatred, even noble beings have to suffer along with evil beings.

Shamboonath was not particularly worried by what was happening in the Valley. He continued with his daily routine and his work of helping people to acquire the fruits of knowledge. But his grown up and married children took their own decisions, and he did not interfere. He had lived his life the way he wanted it, and believed that he had no reason to prevent them from living their's according to their own wishes. Two of his sons were already in Jammu in government service. They had got themselves transferred soon after the unpleasant developments in Anantnag in 1986, when the Muslims openly attacked the Pandits according to a carefully worked out plan.

Shamboonath's youngest son was still with him, because he was without a job. He had applied for one in the Valley, and because he had not got the interview call yet, he had gone to Jammu to spend time with his brothers. When he finally got the letter he had been waiting for, he rushed from Jammu in a bus, got down near the main town, and went to his home to see his parents. Finding that his father was in the fields, he walked to meet him there. Since he wanted to reach Srinagar the same day, Shamboonath advised him to leave a part of the baggage with him. So he left his small suitcase there and took his clothes in a sling bag.

Shamboonath got busy with his work again, and could hardly have imagined the unfortunate consequence of his meeting with his son. An hour or so after the son was gone, two youths came to see him. First, they greeted him warmly and inquired after his health, as was the custom. Soon after, they asked him questions about his son and the reason of his

visit. He told them what he knew: that he had to come from Jammu to face an interview in the city. But the youths wanted to know the secret messages the son had passed on to his father and details about the plans that he had discussed with him. Shamboonath was amused by their imaginative version of his meeting with his son and tried to dispel their baseless fears humorously. But they were not ready to be dismissed like that. They thought that he was being evasive, and this made them angry. So they took him to a nearby barn to get the truth out of him. The terrorists wanted to hear their version of the truth, of which, unfortunately, Shamboonath had no knowledge. Since he did not tell it, they resorted to their usual practice in handling such cases. They beat him and threatened him, but he was unmoved. Finally, in one fit of blind fury, they plunged two red-hot irons into his eyeballs to silence him forever.

My heart bled for Shamboonath. Was this the reward he merited for all the good he had done to people throughout his life? The atrocities committed by the terrorists have shaken people's faith in their gods, too.

34

Why am I constantly reminded of Nura? Nura, who helped my mother to give birth to me, and also took part in my marriage. Is it because I need her to preside over my death, too?

I have no idea about where Nura is. When I met her last, she looked old, tired, and worn out. It was a sad but warm moment for both of us. She was at her daughter's place, where she had gone to attend the marriage of her grandson,

understandably a very special occasion for her. Her husband Hassan Kak was also with her. I could make out that they were there to oversee the huge wazwaan feast, which had been arranged in a beautiful setting.

Nura's daughter, who is a top official in the government, and her husband, a high-ranking engineer, have set up their home in a newly developed housing colony, far away from the traditional downtown. Every house there is on a small farm, which provides for huge lawns of green, full of flowerbeds and landscaped gardens, and also a well-maintained portion of land for growing vegetables for daily use.

I vividly remember that memorable afternoon of a bright and sunny day. It was late October, and the season was mellow and pleasant. When I went inside the big lawn of Nura's daughter, people were having their lunch served by cooks in white pherans and salwars under huge colourful shamianas. Every five to six minutes the cooks stepped in amidst the squatting guests and ladled out course after course of appetizing dishes so well known to the lovers of wazwaan.

All the guests sat in groups of four people around a large round plate specially designed for such feasts. This was meant probably to remind them, as my friend says it humorously, that the most noticeable feature of their faith is its egalitarian spirit of brotherhood, which is seen at its best during eating sessions! There were no women and children among the guests, for they had to be served separately. I could see a few non-Muslims too, who ate from the usual dinner plates singly and not as part of a group. Nura and Hassan Kak sat in a far corner of the tent watching the proceedings. The moment they saw me, they left the place and escorted me to a very

big room fully carpeted for the big occasion in the main house.

Inside the room, they virtually melted into different beings. They took me into their arms and hugged me tightly again and again. Nura, in particular, did that several times, wanting perhaps to make sure that I was very much there. As if this was not enough, she told me repeatedly that she just could not believe that I was there, right in front of her. The endearments, which came with every hug of hers, are so particular to our language that they are just untranslatable.

Nura and Hassan Kak knew that as a Pandit of a very special sect, I could not eat non-vegetarian food that particular day. So they did not even ask me to share lunch with them; instead, they put me at ease by offering me milk and fruit. While I was drinking milk, from a stainless steel glass and not from a china cup, another precaution they knew so well, Nura watched me intently, as if trying to remember something. That was when she lapsed into the past, which both of us had shared, and which seems to be slipping away from our lives with unbelievable rapidity.

Nura told me a long story about my birth, about happenings related to my childhood, which I had spent in their vast compound, and repeatedly confirmed the strong bonds of her in-law's family with the members of my grandfather's large joint family. She also gave me interesting details about my uncles and aunts, which I had not heard from anybody up to that time.

Life, in those days, was slow and peaceful, and she seemed to catch its rhythms in the very mode of her narration, for she went over everything so very slowly. I could also feel that she

dwelt on all these things because she liked revisiting her own youthful days, and my presence was just a helpful stimulus. The present, she told me, had become too hazardous, for militant activities had come to the surface somewhat suddenly and glaringly. Because the militants had attacked her only son twice, for being a stern and efficient police officer of the state, she feared for his life. The family, she said, virtually sat on a volcano. Going out of one's home had become too risky.

Nura also asked me questions about my parents, my wife, and children—how old were they, what they were doing at present, and whether they had taken after my wife or me. She was pleased with what I said about them, that they were more like me than my wife, and that they were doing well in school. When I told her that I had branched out of the large family tree to set up a small home of my own, she spoke no words of complaint. I thought she understood it in the right spirit because she did not say the kind of sentimental things that old people among the Kashmiris generally say about the breaking up of joint families. She told me how she herself had been compelled to dispose off the ancestral home of her husband. As a concession to her daughter's wishes, she had built a new one near her place because the daughter wanted to ensure that she was properly looked after. Her son's police job forced him to stay out of the city for days at a time. Nura also spoke lovingly about her numerous grandchildren, the first one from her son being just a few months old.

When I rose to leave, I realized that we had spent more than four hours in that room, totally unmindful of the feast outside. By then, the guests had departed, and the children who had been forced to remain inside during the time it was

on, were now playing under the empty shamiana. When I apologized to Nura and Hassan Kak for keeping them away from the feast, they assured me that they very much wanted to see me; the feast was just an excuse to make it possible.

At the time of our final parting there was a prayer on Nura's lips: "May Allah keep you safe, and may we meet again." Right now, I am not even sure if I will survive to see her. But I do miss her benign presence.

35

Conditions in the city, in fact in the entire Valley, show no signs of improvement. Reports about the killings of Pandits from different parts of the Valley are pouring in at an alarming rate.

Yesterday, quite late in the evening, when the darkness had deepened to create frightful shadows, I heard a knock on the door. My heart missed a beat because a knock late in the dark could mean a final call for anybody, for this was usually from the militants on the run. Surinder's words echoed in my ear: "In their desperation, the militants will do anything to save themselves from falling into the hands of the police; they will barge into any house to seek a hiding place." With almost suspended breath, I looked pointedly at the door. Then I heard a second tap, followed by another one. Instantly, I recognized the familiar code, and rushed down to open the door. Even while doing so, I felt uneasy because I usually heard this familiar, friendly knock during the day and not at this late hour, when no sane person was supposed to be out. This was unusual, and I soon found that I was right. For, I saw a worried

and dishevelled Sunil, with another person whom I did not know in tow. They both were tired and worn out; Sunil's companion also looked frightened. When they came in, I fastened the latch door, rushed to the kitchen, made a quick cup of tea for all of us, to put them at ease and help them recover their breath and composure. It was only after that that Sunil introduced me to Makhanji.

Makhanji looks much older than the two of us. Of medium height, fair in his complexion and with sharp features, with black and gray hair, he is quite a handsome person. At that moment, he looked distraught. Sunil used his culinary skills to prepare a tasty meal; that, he said, was in honour of Makhanji, for celebrating his freedom. Seeing my puzzled look, for I knew nothing about Makhanji and his activities, Sunil told Makhanji to narrate in his own words the story of his newly acquired freedom.

It took him a long while to do so, and I could see that he enjoyed doing it. It looked as if he was trying to get over his nightmarish experience by dispelling it from his system. Perhaps narrating is enabling. Makhanji's experience was truly and unbelievably hair-raising. After hearing him, I had no doubt that he was truly reborn.

Makhanji lives in a village in the district of Anantnag. It is dotted with several small beautiful streams of clear water. By every stream stands a house. Almost all of them belong to the Pandits. It has been like that for generations, and nobody has any complaints about it. I say it because the Muslims live on the other side of the village, where there are no streams. During the past several decades, there has been a steady increase in the size and number of Muslim dwellings, but all

of them have come up only in that part of the village. This, too, the Pandits have accepted as a part of the changing times. The advantage of the location of their dwellings does not look as striking now as it did several decades ago. For, in comparison with the new modern Muslïm houses with bright corrugated iron roofs, glazed glass windows, and cemented exteriors, their houses look old-fashioned, even primitive, but they bear the impress of old architecture, which gives them a quaint, beautiful look. Makhanji's house is one of the bigger and better houses in this locality.

Four days ago, while returning from his work, Makhanji was accosted by two young Muslims who had just got down from a white Ambassador car. Its engine was on, the driver was at the wheel, and another person with a half-covered face sat by his side. Makhanji knew each and every person of the village and all the villagers knew him quite well. So when they asked him if he knew Makhanji and where they could find him, he did not tell them that he was the person they were looking for; instead, he asked them why they wanted to meet him. When they said that they had to discuss some very important things with him, which were of a confidential nature, he became suspicious. He told them politely that he did not know Makhanji, and they would need to go inside the village to look for him. When their car, which had been parked a little away from where they met him, drove towards the village, his roving eye caught its number-plate. His fears were confirmed, for the car belonged to one of the leading political figures of the district, whom he knew, and whose sympathy for the militants had become too well-known by then. He also recognized the driver and the man with a half-covered face, who was his chief aid.

Like a young boy, Makhanji ran through the fields as fast as he could. Without stopping and talking to people in the compound of his home, he rushed up to the top floor to ensure that the youths had no chance of catching him. He had barely made it to that place, when the two people entered his house.

Seeing them with guns, Makhanji's wife swooned in the compound. But his mother, though eighty years old, showed extraordinary courage and presence of mind. She called out the name of her Muslim neighbour and friend Rahti, urging her to ensure the safety of her son, and caught hold of one of the two young men by the scruff of his neck. It was a grip that he could not unfasten; but the one who escaped her grip did not pay any attention to the appeal to her neighbour. He was sure that it was meant to confuse him, to deflect him from his purpose. So he entered the house in search of his victim.

From the top floor of the house, Makhanji had watched them come in. He quickly moved to the attic floor and decided to hide himself in the huge box used for storing spare mattresses and quilts. A last-minute flash made him change his mind. Instead of getting into the box, he hid himself in the small gap behind it and the inclined roof. He knew that it was too narrow, but it was safe, for it was not open to view from any side. One had to bend oneself on the entire breadth of the box to peer into this space from the top. He wriggled his body to squeeze himself in; once there, he held his breath. By then, the terrorist had reached the spot.

Makhanji could sense his presence and feel his searching eye looking everywhere: in the huge earthen pots of rice, broken and discarded boxes, and cupboards. Then he heard him approaching the big box. Once there, the militant exhaled

a long breath of relief, for he was sure that his victim was right there. He called out his name loudly and asked him to show himself because the game was now over. When he did not get any response, he lifted the lid of the box. He pulled out everything from it, examined even the folds of the old and worn out quilts, but did not find his victim. Gnashing his teeth in anger, he brought down the lid of the box with such ferocity that Makhanji almost gave out a shriek. Then he heard the terrorist strike desperately at everything, but he kept his cool.

Sensing that he had perhaps made a mistake, the terrorist jumped the stairs with furious speed, released his companion from the grip of Makhanji's mother with a wild swing, and rushed to Rahti's house. This was the opportunity Makhanji was waiting for. In one swift action, he came down from the attic floor, waved at his mother and his unconscious wife, pointing out to them that he was rushing towards Sunil's village. From there, the two made a swift move to the city, and then to my place, but only after darkness had set in.

I was brimming with questions. I felt that, like a mischievous narrator, Makhanji left so many loose ends in his story. How, for example, did his mother save herself? Why didn't the militants kill her, especially after seeing that she had come in their way? His answer was short and unbelievably satisfying. His mother was not killed because they were not interested in her death. They only wanted to kidnap the most known person of the community to create panic among its members. For that was the new strategy.

If the Pandits were still staying in any part of the Valley in a sizable number, the militants created conditions in which they felt unsafe, forcing them to flee the place, like the ones

who had already left. Earlier, they left with whatever they could manage from their belongings, but now the militants wanted them to leave empty handed. This too they ensured by shooting two Pandits who were found putting their belongings in trucks. In one case, a couple who had been living in Jammu for several years and who had come to Srinagar only to get whatever was in their home had to pay with their lives. The terrorists made it look gruesome by its timing. When the two of them had spent three to four hours putting all their things in a truck they had hired for the purpose and looked at each other with a sense of satisfaction and relief, just then, the terrorists, who had been watching from a safe distance, shot them dead. In panic, the driver drove away, leaving behind the dead husband and wife. After this, who would have dared to risk one's life?

36

It took me some time to make sense of Makhanji's story. And when I did, I began to feel worried over my poor understanding of the situation in which we had been pushed by circumstances over which we had no control. It also set me thinking. If things were different in the past, why had they changed now, and with such rapidity? Or could it be that they had changed gradually, but most of us, including me, had either failed to notice or maybe refused to notice? When I spoke to Makhanji about this, he too felt the same confusion, the same unease. He felt sure now that we had erred in gauging the change that had been taking place around us. Whatever unpleasant things had happened in the past, including sporadic

incidents of communal strife, had been dismissed by most of us as incidental happenings. Now it was clear to him that they were part of a larger, carefully conceived plan which, some Muslims thought, had surfaced too soon, probably because of the sudden and unexpected death of Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator of Pakistan. This reminded me of the remark of a passerby, when the militants surfaced openly during the closing days of 1989, that it should not have happened that soon. At that time, I ignored it as a casual, inadvertent remark. Now it is clear to me that he had meant every word of what he had said.

It is also clear to us now that some agency was masterminding the entire chain of events. If that is true, what were our intelligence agencies doing? Makhanji put it simply but tellingly: that they were just sleeping. But instantly, he qualified his statement with a smile. The intelligence people were doing their job, but the governments in the state and the centre were just not bothered about what they were being told.

Busy with their never-ending power games, the politicians at the helm of affairs in the centre were more worried about retaining their offices than about the safety of the country. The state government, as always, let things drift till they reached calamitous proportions. In 1989, the militants accomplished everything they wanted, perhaps even more than what they could have expected, without even making an appearance. They stopped people from going to their offices for days on end, and nobody was bothered; they ordered the closure of all liquor-selling shops, and nobody felt worried. Employees of several hotels in the heart of the city, who ran bars for the government, were dragged out of their working places and

beaten in full public view on the busiest streets of the city, but the police just did not see anything. Cinema houses were forcibly closed and nobody in the government seemed affected by this unusual development. People were urged to withdraw money from nationalized banks, and the concerned authorities just let it happen. In short, whatever the terrorists wished they accomplished, just by issuing a writ; they were spared the use of force. The governor of the state was safely ensconced in his chamber totally unperturbed, and the chief minister was busy playing golf. Together, they let the militants capture the public imagination.

Besides issuing commands and prescribing codes about dress, appearance, behaviour and conduct, the militants, emboldened by the rapidity with which they exacted obedience from the people, also ensured that they projected themselves as brave, valorous, and dedicated mujahids, the new saviours of the beleaguered people, who, in their view, had been let down by successive regimes of so-called democratically elected governments. This was an unusual situation for all of us, for we had never seen such a powerful demonstration of the exercise of de facto authority. One had to be there to believe that such a thing was possible. An elected government in power had been rendered defunct by a group of people who did a great deal of ordering about and made people accept whatever they wanted. The elected ministers and the bureaucracy were busy working in their offices with matters that could be anybody's guess. There was even a rumour that they were working towards providing a safe haven for the smooth working of the militant dictate. For, the police were kept at a safe distance from the people who needed protection

against the militants and their arbitrary ways. When I lamentably told Makhanji and Sunil that we too had done nothing to stop this, Sunil's answer was as short as it could be, "What could we have done? Do we really count? Do we really have a voice?" And I realized that a handful of people could not do anything to turn the direction of such a massive wind of enforced change. "Then why are we here?" I asked them somewhat desperately. "Because we are here and have been here," Sunil said, "habit, if nothing else."

Throughout our hopeless conversation, Makhanji looked very serious. Next morning, he had to leave for Jammu for the sake of his dear life. So he left instructions for his mother and wife with Sunil. He knew that they too had to prepare for leaving the place, for his old mother could not hold the fort in her village home for too long. Besides, his story would have created shock waves in the entire village, prompting people to fly away from their invisible enemies, who were proving more dangerous than the ones who were known. After telling Sunil what steps he had to take, Makhanji looked somewhat relieved, and he began another story about what happened in Anantnag in 1986, and why the lessons of those happenings had been lost upon the likes of him. This was his way of making sense of things that he had taken lightly then; he was looking at the past again to understand what was happening now.

It began as a small affair, as it often happens in history. One enthusiastic Muslim young man returned to his home after getting his PhD in Arabic from a foreign university. He found that his hometown was no more than a sleepy place, somewhat remote and outmoded, because it had continued

with the tradition of building bonds of amity between the Muslims and Pandits. These, he thought, needed to be broken; his people needed to be re-invigorated to live up to the new, changed image of Muslims all over the world. Instead of pushing his newly acquired understanding of the Muslim character down the throat of his people by using the ready-made platform of his father, who would address people on Fridays on the requirements of their faith, he chose a different strategy. He involved them in action. In an exciting speech, which became well known later on, he revealed to his brethren that the Pandits had forcibly taken illegal control of three of their known religious sites. These needed to be reclaimed. The speech was both sensational and stirring. A large number of people, who had no knowledge of what it was like in the past, got so enthused by what he said that they decided to resort to direct action. From the main town, they made a huge procession towards one of the three sites. Right then, and not before this, as if it was a scenario written by some scriptwriter of a Hindi film, the police swung into action. At first, they tried to disperse people without using force. When it did not work, and the crowd got out of control, they resorted to firing. Everybody ran for safety. In the confusion that followed, one boy received a fatal bullet wound. Like a good strategist, the Qazi, for that is how he eventually became known and famous, effectively exploited this death for the advancement of the faith.

The place where the boy had died, he revealed in yet another declamatory speech of his, had become sacred and, therefore, needed to be consecrated to his memory. A new mosque, to be appropriately named Shahidi Mosque, would

be built at that site. This idea spread fast and became a strong rallying point for the highly charged Muslims. The people affected by this proposed change in the existing shape of the town, for it involved the removal of several shops and buildings, were the Pandits, who rightfully protested against this move. The police swung into action again to disperse the crowds who invaded the streets in support of their decision, but the Qazi moved about freely, looking happy and satisfied with his newfound importance.

The Qazi's growing popularity among the Muslims was read by other political leaders as a threat to their leadership. So they tried to use the resurgent awakening among the Muslims to their advantage. The leaders of the so-called secular parties, such as the Indian National Congress, jumped into the fray, and addressed large crowds to galvanize the Muslims into action. The burden of their speeches was to remind the Pandits that they had to respect the wishes of the Muslims because they were the majority community in the Valley, and the sites, which had been with the Pandits for centuries, a fact which most people knew and even acknowledged but not in public, should be handed over to them.

One such leader, whose daughter's kidnapping in the closing days of 1990 virtually turned militancy into a full-scale anti-national movement, became the respected leader of another secular party and the Home Minister of India. The result of this multi-pronged attack was the first-ever major strife between the two communities in which violent Muslim mobs attacked Pandit houses and set them ablaze in numerous villages. Very soon, however, another band of leaders came forward to preach the lesson of peace and friendship,

emphasizing that the dispute over the site was no more than a ripple over placid waters, and the result of a mischievous invention that had no basis in fact. Many organizations, several of them from outside the state, provided financial assistance to the affected people to rebuild their damaged homes and temples, which had been destroyed in a single day. But some Pandits woke up to smell the winds of change; they sold off a part of their property in the villages to buy land and houses in Jammu and in the neighbouring states of Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and in Delhi. But Makhanji had stuck to his place and was now paying for it.

When Makhanji finished his account, the night was past its prime. The three of us looked like mournful shadows. It was all quiet outside, but our hearts were agitated. Every passing moment was like a calamity. I suggested to Makhanji that he rest till the morning, when he was to start for his onward journey. When I asked Sunil what his plans were, he said he was not sure. Earlier he was like a messenger of death, but now he was acting like a saviour. I knew he was taking a big risk in doing all this, for innumerable people had been engaged by the militants to keep a watchful eye on individuals who moved about too frequently, but he did not care. He told me that he would put Makhanji on the bus and then, most probably, return to his village, to his people.

Makhanji left today in the early hours of the morning. He wanted to make sure that nobody saw him coming out of my home, he told me in a voice heavy with gratitude as well as anxiety. Poor Makhanji! I feel sad for him, because I know that after crossing over to Jammu he has no chance of returning to the Valley. 'Once an outsider, always an outsider,' is the new

slogan of the local Muslims. Would Makhanji look back wistfully on the land of his birth and youth? Wouldn't it be heart rending for him?

37

Makhanji reminded me of another Makhanji, whom I met for the first time as a small child. Where would he be now? In Srinagar or in Jammu? How difficult things have become for the likes of me. We cannot move out safely to see where our people are. I have no knowledge of how many of my relatives are still in the city. My father's sister and her family live so far away from my place. I am not even sure if they are safe and if they are here or in Jammu.

Makhanji was no relative of ours, not even a proper acquaintance. He was the neighbour of the aged cousin of my grandfather. So you may guess what he was to me! But in those days, relationships of this kind were not unusual, for blood was not the only bond that tied people together. The aged cousin of my grandfather, called Sati Ded, was no less than a phenomenon, a formidable woman of huge proportions. Widowed at a young age, she had struggled hard to bring up her children, and my grandfather had been a great support. That is why she came to our place quite often, to impress upon her relatives and children that she had reliable supporters and well-wishers.

When I saw her for the first time in the home of my birth, she was like a colossus: a huge, white-haired, round-faced woman, wearing a sprawling pheran. Her visit always caused a commotion in the house. A couple of mattresses had to be

brought to seat her aged limbs, and she took a solid half-hour to settle down. She occupied the most prominent place in the living room and did considerable ordering about, for her needs were enormous. She consumed large quantities of water at regular intervals, and her demands for eating were limitless. She sneezed quite frequently with alarming loudness because she inhaled pinches of snuff through her nose in rapid succession. Even my grandfather, who was quite a fiery character, because of which everybody in the house held him in awe, would cower before her. When I once talked slightingly about her to him because she had been nasty to me, his reaction was worth seeing. After clamping his palm on my mouth with such force that I felt like crying, he signalled to me not to open it again for saying anything against her. It was a mystery to me why she wielded so much power in our house.

Whenever she was in a good mood, Sati Ded could be just charming. She would put her hand in her pheran-pocket and jingle her huge stock of silver rupees, which I always associate with her. Was she rich, I asked my father once? He was not too sure, but I felt she was. She lived in a huge house, five storeys high, with spacious rooms on every floor and a compound so big that you could pitch two large shamianas to accommodate two bridal parties in it. I learnt later that her husband left her a pot-full of silver rupees and a small sack of gold ornaments too. Perhaps that is why everybody respected her. When she jingled those rupees in her pocket, I would toss myself in her lap; she would hug me and put her rosy mouth on my face for a long while. She loved children very much, but only when they conformed to her rigorous codes of proper behaviour. My mother and aunt, who were

almost of the same age, would be like two obedient servants to her, just waiting to carry out her orders.

During one of her visits, which lasted nearly a month, she invited me to her home. I promptly complied, for in spite of her frightful bulk and stiff bearing, her heart was like a tender flower: soft, sweet, and supple. In her home I always sat near her and she told me long and enchanting stories about her youthful days. Much of what she said appeared remote to me. I found it particularly hard to believe that she could have been a young, slim bride at some time, and often made fun of her bulk. But she would just smile and frighten me by saying that some day my mother, who was extremely beautiful then, like a film actress, as some people said, and even my wife, when I would get married and have children, would become like her. Though she said that women became big and bulky because they had to bear children, I found it difficult to believe.

In spite of her frightening talk, I enjoyed being near her. Possibly because of her interest in me, everybody in her home, her daughter-in-law, who also appeared to me quite old, and her young daughter-in-law, treated me as somebody special. She commanded the respect of all her neighbours—men, women, and children. All of them were ready to run errands for her. One of them, who visited her everyday in her house, was Makhanji, a dwarfish person with brown hair and brown freckles on his face, which gave him an unusual appearance.

A narrow lane separated the houses of Sati Ded and Makhanji. During the day, resting herself on clean white-covered bolsters, she would sit in the small, round balcony of her house, where she commanded a full view of the four neighbouring Pandit houses, including Makhanji's. Being a

great conversationalist, she often spoke to women from across the lane right from her place. Invariably, they also sent her things in a small wicker basket which was manipulated by strings from where she sat. A steaming pot of vegetables, a piece of fruit, roasted grams or fried peanuts. Like an expert commander, she exacted obedience from everybody.

After returning from his office, Makhanji would dutifully come to her place, almost in the manner of a ritual act, ask her how she had fared during the day and take orders from her. She did not need much to be done by him, for her sons would always do her bidding, obediently and respectfully. Even then, he always asked her if she wanted him to do anything. When she noticed that I felt somewhat bored inside the house, she ordered him to take me to Hari Parbat on the following Sunday. This is one of the most memorable visits of my early life, for it changed me in many ways.

On that Sunday, quite early in the morning, as was the practice then, Makhanji took me along, through what is now the most densely-populated area of the downtown, through narrow lanes, portions of which were paved with stone, with overflowing drains, full of thick, blackish water, mixed with blades of dry grass, wet paper, and rags of all kinds. Some lanes were full of stench, for thick bits of turd of various colours and sizes coursed merrily through the drains in slow motion. I had never seen this part of the city before.

Since it was early morning, very few people were outside their homes. We saw rows and rows of small cramped houses, very congested and old looking. Loud music blared from radios from some of the houses, which, also because of their low windows, were exposed to the public view. After crossing

several streets of this kind, we came out on the open road and reached what later on I learnt was the Nowhatta Chowk.

From here the air changed, for we were now passing through an open road with very few houses around. A large part of it was covered with graves big and small, some roughly hewn and some finely chiseled, with words written on them in beautiful calligraphy. Then we entered what at one time was the main entrance of a huge enclosed space. The wall was unbelievably thick and looked quite ancient. Here, through another cluster of houses on either side of a lane, I saw two different sites. One of these was a Muslim shrine.

On the other side was a small building whose front was blazing with small flaming lamps in the hands of a large group of people who were chanting devotional songs in Kashmiri and Sanskrit. Everyone there held the lamp for a few minutes, chanted something, and swung it in a circular or semi-circular motion. This was the famous temple of Ganesha. A large part of the Hill, which opened to our view later on, had been covered on all sides within the frame of a small room and painted with vermilion, that being the colour associated with Ganesha. Some people had gone inside it through a side entrance, but we stayed outside.

Makhanji spoke to one of the pujaris, got two earthen lamps, and gave one to me. It was a pleasant, I would say even exhilarating, feeling to be addressing the image of a god. Like everybody else around me, I closed my eyes for a few minutes and tried to concentrate on that image. For a moment I felt some kind of a glow within, but it did not last long. I think it was partly because there were so many people around and there was lot of noise too, for everyone was talking and singing

and doing something or the other. I saw men, women, and children stop there, pay their ritual obeisance to Lord Ganesha and then move ahead. This, Makhanji told me, was just the beginning of our walk round the Hari Parbat Hill.

Crossing the lane we saw more of the Hill on our right and huge orchards of almond trees on our left. When in bloom with tender flowers, as they were at that time of the year, the trees are a delightful sight, which I enjoyed seeing again and again in later years. On the top of the right side of the Hill was a huge stony wall. Makhanji said that it was the site of an ancient fort, inside which was the temple of Durga, which was opened to devotees only on some known auspicious days in our local calendar.

Walking over what was a part of the foot of the Hill, we saw another structure on it at a slightly lower level than the main fort. This, I learnt, was the Chakreshwar Temple, which looked very beautiful from where we were. We climbed nearly a hundred steps to reach its main gate. Every step was paved with engraved slabs of stone with a thick low parapet wall on either side. The parapet provided a much-needed convenient resting-place for people who went up to visit the temple. Inside were the image of goddess Sharika and a part of the Hill, which was covered with sindoor and flowers. I saw lots of people there singing Kashmiri songs addressed to the Devi to the accompaniment of several local instruments. When Makahnji told me that all of them had been singing for the whole night, my eyes opened wide with disbelief. I little knew that some day I would be among them, singing in praise of the goddess, who, I discovered later, was the patron goddess of our family. I also learnt that all the Pandits had their patron

goddesses, and this determined the nature of the rituals they observed and also the offerings they made to them.

Unlike many other goddesses in the Valley, Goddess Sharika accepted offerings of mutton. On any auspicious day, which could be easily ascertained from our local almanac, people would go to Hari Parbat with packs of cooked yellow rice and chunks of the liver of a lamb cooked in hot chilly gravy. For a prasad, it was quite delicious. That day, of course, I had to make do with the prasad given by another pujari—a spoonful of sweet water and a handful of sweet bonbons. Everybody there had a huge sindoor tilak on the forehead applied by the pujari. People also poured water from small pots of brass or steel on the image of the Devi.

After coming out of the temple, we descended down from the other side of the Hill using another set of steps which were much flatter than the ones we had used for climbing. It was fresh and breezy and one could smell spring in the air, but the sun hadn't come up yet. Then I saw a number of smaller temples near the foot of the Hill and some specially made sitting places open on all sides but covered with a roof where people stopped for rest or for meditating on their favourite deities.

By now the crowds had grown larger because lots of people, especially the ones who came daily and did not go up the Hill, caught up with us. Many amongst them were talking, or singing in loud tones, or chanting their favourite bhajans. During our walk round the Hill, I also saw a very deep dry well in one of the garden spaces that could have been two to three hundred feet deep. I did not dare go near it. We also saw the long rectangular building of the main jail of the city

and the lunatic asylum. The presence of these buildings confused me a great deal because by no stretch of imagination could I associate them with any godlike activity. But before I could ask Makhanji about it, we were off.

We came out of the periphery of the Hill through another huge gate, which looked massive and very old. It was a part of a big structure that provided enough space on two sides for people to rest their weary limbs. Makhanji told me that it had been built during Mughal times. By the time I reached this place, I was really tired. So I sat down to take rest. When Makhanji saw that I did not feel like getting up, he was compelled to carry me on his back. I could see him groaning under my weight, but he went on bravely, possibly because he did not want to incur the wrath of Sati Ded. When we finally reached the main road, we got into a tonga, which dropped us near the main lane leading to our place. By then I was so tired that I fell asleep immediately after taking a cup of milk.

38

As a student I had learnt that coincidences are the stock-in-trade of badly made books or films, especially Hindi films, but today I found that they have a place in real life, too. Makhanji of my childhood days is just before me. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that I would meet him in these strife-torn times, in such unusual circumstances. Because I was seeing him after a very long time, it took me a while to recognize him. He has grown old and lost much of his long and bushy hair. Like a suppliant, he is begging me for help, for hiding him from the public eye! When I asked

him what had brought him to such a pass, he poured out the story of Sarwanand Koul, whose murder by the militants had been announced on the radio yesterday night.

Makhanji is a distant relative of Sarwanand. He had gone to his place to escape the suffocation he experienced in his downtown locality, for militancy in that part of the city was more visible and troublesome than in any other place. It seems that when Makahnji met Sarwanand at some gathering and told him the miserable story of his painful stay at home, he suggested that he come over to his place for some days. There is no danger there, he said to him, because he enjoyed the complete confidence and trust of the people of his village.

In many villages, the Pandits asked the Muslims point blank if they wanted them to stay on or to quit. Premi, which was the pen name of Sarwanand, had been graciously allowed to stay. Makhanji thought it quite understandable. Who would not have liked such a person to stay with them? Besides being a respectable elder of the village, he was a scholar of repute, and a fine poet, who had translated classics like the Bhagvadgita into Kashmiri. With the assured support of the Muslims, he and his family had stayed on. Because of him, many other Pandit families had also stayed on.

When Makhanji reached his home, Premi was his usual cheerful self. He told him with pride that the Muslims of the village had not only made him stay with them, but also saw to it that he did not come to harm from any quarter. Makhanji really liked it there. Premi took him out to see his fields, spoke to him about his plans, and also commented on the current situation in the Valley. He admitted that what was happening around was unfortunate, but did not consider the situation all

that hopeless, and was sure of things improving soon. Since Makhanji had already retired, he was in no hurry to go back to his home, where the chances of things improving did not look or sound so promising as they did here. So he decided to stay as long as he could. But Premi's optimism did not last long. He met a brutal death, and it became clear to Makhanji, and to everybody else in that village, that Pandits were risking their lives by staying on in the Valley.

Makahnji narrated to me how it all happened. One evening, three young men came into Premi's house to tell him that they needed his help and guidance for sorting out a very important matter. He welcomed them and asked them to take their seat, but they refused to sit. They wanted him to join them outside; the matter was too sensitive to be discussed inside his home. Helpful as he was, he promptly agreed to their request. Seeing that his father was going out with people who were not fully known to him, Premi's son asked them if he could go along. They looked at each other for a second or two, and agreed to his request. This, in fact, dispelled any doubts that his family members might have entertained about them. Makhanji said that for them it was no less than a boon, for later events revealed that this provided them the opportunity of killing two people without taking undue risks.

It was a little dark outside when they left. On an impulse, Makhanji followed them at a safe distance, without letting them know that he was in their tow. Had it not been so, we may not have known what happened between the time Premi and his son left their home and when their bodies were discovered the next morning. Like the great saviours of past, Premi was found nailed to a tree; the body of his unfortunate

son, who virtually invited his death, was dangling from a side branch. Militants have killed many people, but not so brutally.

What Makhanji narrated to me, I found difficult to believe. Though he was in close pursuit of the militants and their victims, he heard only bits and parts of their conversation, for he was away from their direct gaze. He had to strain his ears to listen to their words. The youths had no problem to discuss, no questions to ask, and no advice to seek. They just seemed offended by Premi's presence, for he was an old-style Pandit, with a turban on his head and a tilak on his forehead, and he moved about freely with a confident air. This symbol of Pandithood, as they called it, was too unbearable for them, because it did not fit in their new scheme of things. Premi, I am sure, must have been shocked to hear them speak in this vein. So he berated them soundly for preaching their new gospel of exclusiveness. The young men did not like this. They retorted angrily to tell him that he had paraded his tilak and turban for too long. These had to go, for their time was over.

When Premi's son found that things were getting out of hand, he intervened to say that his father was too old to change his ways; besides, he enjoyed the support of his Muslim brethren for being what he was, in the same form in which he was before them. This fueled their rage. They cursed these Muslim brethren, the old buffers and fogies, who were influenced by the Pandits to such an extent that they had forgotten their very own faith; they even questioned their authority to issue protective edicts.

When their anger mounted to frightful limits, Premi's son pleaded with his father that they return to their place. This enraged the young men, for this was not what they wanted.

They caught hold of the son and were about to hit him, when Premi intervened to prevent a possible confrontation. But they pushed him aside and beat the son with such force that he fell down unconscious. Premi was shocked. And then they did things, which seem just out of this world, so Makhanji said. They got a piece of rope with which they strangled the unconscious son, who did not need to let out a sigh or groan. They caught hold of Premi and shook him hard several times. His turban fell from his head and rolled on the ground. They trampled over it with demonic ferocity, as if it was a venomous snake that needed to be killed instantly. They looked at his tilak, and spat on it, as if it was something evil and detestable. And then they got that gruesome idea. Just from somewhere they picked a big nail and a hammer. They first hit him all over, almost reduced him to pulp; then they took him near a tree, held him right in the front and bore the nail into him just where his tilak was, as if the thing they did not like was to be nailed forever. Probably because Premi's eyes remained wide open, they thought that he was mocking them even in his death, otherwise why should they have gouged them out.

The militants let the two bodies stay like that to be discovered by the people next morning—object lessons for the Pandits and for everybody else who sympathized with their miserable lot. The villagers too saw the fruit of their faith, but did not dare to utter even a word. There was not even a murmur. Only the press got a proper headline. The gruesome sight made Makhanji piss in his pyjamas. He was fully convinced that the murderers had sensed his presence and would seek him out. He was so sure of it that it was no use

arguing with him. That is why he ran away from there, and came to my home, to seek my help.

Premi's killing has triggered a mass migration of Pandits from the entire belt stretching from Anantnag to Kokernag. The mujahids played their cards well, by liquidating the most venerable person from the community in as brutal a manner as possible, and thus spreading the waves of fear and terror in the entire area. The houses and fields of the Pandits are empty now and may remain like that for years to come. I find it difficult to understand why Premi should have met such a fate. Maybe the fruit of some past karma!

39

Why do I think only of Premi? Is it because Makhanji, who carried me on his back in my childhood, is with me, and already affected by Premi's tragic death? Or is it because it is too loathsome and too fresh? His murder haunts me; it forces me to reckon with an unpleasant reality: that nobody speaks for Pandits who have died and the ones who are dying almost daily. I have noticed that people from outside the state talk and write only about police brutalities and atrocities on militants and their sympathizers and deaths of civilians in encounters between militants and the police. Premi's death looks to me a sort of culminating point of so many other deaths, deaths that had been labelled political for one reason or the other, and therefore conveniently explained away—the deaths of Taploo, Ganju, Bhat, and Lassa Koul, the director of the TV station at Srinagar. All these deaths have forced people to reconsider their decision to stay on in the

place of their birth, and to rethink the assurances of their Muslim friends and neighbours.

All of them were prominent people. Some had political associations, too, but they did not belong to any subversive organization, and they were not responsible for spreading hate among people. Taploo was a lawyer and the only known BJP leader from Kashmir Valley. In the relatively calm times of 1989, when militancy had not surfaced so stridently as it did in the closing months of 1990, he was shot dead in a crowded locality at point blank range when he was on his way to work. Ganju was a retired judge whose professional obligations made him pass judgments on criminals who are now considered martyrs. Therefore, he was targeted in one of the busiest shopping centres of the city, Hari Singh High Street, just around lunchtime. Bhat the lawyer was shot dead by a youth in what is probably the busiest chowk of Anantnag town when he was returning from the district court where he had helped one of his Muslim clients win a case against the state government. His sin, we learnt later, was that he was an outspoken individual, a competent lawyer, and an efficient journalist. When they were killed, the argument circulated by the terrorists was that they killed people selectively, only those among the Pandits whose past actions had proved detrimental to the aspirations of the present-day Muslims. This revisionary impulse necessitated the writing of a new history, by eliminating people who wittingly or unwittingly had done something which went contrary to their interests. Every one seemed to accept this logic; even organizations in and outside the Valley believed it, for there

was no outcry against any of these murders. The police, as far as I know, have not punished anybody so far.

But what about poor Lassa Koul? When I asked a close Muslim friend what his fault was, he admitted that he wasn't sure. As the director of Radio Kashmir, he did everything possible to bolster the image of the institution, honoured all prominent Muslims for their contribution to the media, and promoted Kashmiri language, literature, and culture in a big way. As the director of the TV Station, he had started infusing the same spirit into the visual media, but the people who were calling the shots in the Valley were not interested in this; they wanted him to use the media to their advantage. Since he was the head of an institution of the Government of India and also because the TV showed the terrorists in a poor light by reporting their criminal activities, he had to be finished off. The moment he gripped the door handle of the main entrance of the compound of his newly built house, where he had gone to visit his aged parents after a long interval, bullets were pumped into him with such speed and in such profusion that he crumbled then and there. The government has still not been able to find his murderers, although months have passed by. Lassa Koul lived in a high security zone of the city under heavy protection and nobody should have known that he was going to see his parents, and yet he got killed. The militants obviously have an efficient spy system.

The situation now is that terrorists kill Pandits, not just those who are known to have some political connection. That is why in some part of the city or in some distant village of the Valley, two to three Pandits are done to death every day.

Premi was no political leader, but a scholar and a poet who wrote songs of love and brotherhood. Still he was killed, because some people considered him a glowing embodiment of Pandithood.

If the Muslims of the Valley think that the Pandits are an obstacle in their new dream of a better Kashmir, or whatever Kashmir they have in mind, why don't they pass legislation ordering our eviction? This will make their task easy and the Pandits too will know where they stand. The government is just acting irresponsibly. If such acts of selective killings are not stopped, I don't know where they will lead us.

Are Pandits really an obstacle in the designs of the terrorists? I don't think they are. All along they have done their best to help the Muslim community to grow and prosper. Even when successive governments in the state did everything to lessen their chances of staying on in the Valley through highly discriminatory policies in hiring people and admitting young men and women to professional colleges, they still stayed on because they have a home here. But now everybody is telling them that they do not belong here. And the government is hardly doing anything to protect them. This leaves them with no option but to flee.

What shall I do? Makhanji is sleeping in the other room. What will he do? I saw one Makhanji off the day before. Shall I have to see off the other one, too? As for me, I think I need to wait for Girija and the children; they have promised to return. Is that a reason or an excuse? I cannot say.

40

Jammu is very much in the news these days. The terrorists don't consider it a city, an important part of the state, for it is its winter capital, but an enemy city, for it provides shelter to its potential victims. Most of the fleeing Pandits are living there in camps, where they have been put in makeshift tents. The terrorists call it a forbidden place. A Pandit returnee from Jammu is a suspect in the eyes of the militants because they think that they go there to master the art of sabotage. Many returnees to the Valley have already been eliminated. It is also a warning to people that those who leave their homes cannot return.

Interestingly, here too the militants observe double standards. For most of the Muslims, Jammu is a city of pleasure; they go there to escape the oppressive climate of the Valley, to watch films and drink whisky. When they return, no one is worried; when Pandits return, everyone looks at them with suspicion. Killing them is considered the best way to overcome it.

Makhanji is waiting to go to Jammu because this is his only chance of survival. In Kashmir, he is already a doomed person. But what kind of life awaits him in Jammu? At the moment, he does not think about it, but he will have to, once he puts his foot there. When my friend Ali Mohd saw me last, he said that the plight of Pandits in Jammu was pathetic. His old neigbhours, whom he met there accidentally, gave him details about their living there; these confirm that Pandits have been forced to live in subhuman conditions. Families that had huge houses in the city of Srinagar and in the towns of Anantnag,

Baramullah, and Sopore have been compelled to live in cramped dwellings, because the steady rush of people into the city has put pressure on living accommodations. The city cannot bear the extra burden of so many people; with swelling numbers, conditions are worsening by the day. Rents have touched a new high and the prices of essential commodities have shot up. The villagers have been the worst sufferers. The government has put them up in tents in the outskirts of the city, where facilities are not just minimal, but non-existent. People used to the salubrious climate of the Valley have now to live huddled lives and content with the heat of Jammu. Men, women, and children have literally to sleep on top of each other because there is no room. "Would you call this living?" was Ali Mohd's sad lament. Since I know Jammu and its heat and aridity, I can visualize what it must be like out there. Soon there will be rains, the kind of which the Pandits have never known in Kashmir. Their tented dwellings will crumble under the weight of water and the pressure of wind. They will sigh and groan and curse their fate.

Ali Mohd says that the Pandits have already begun to see their plight as of people who have fallen from the frying pan into the fire. The old mother of his neighbour spoke to him in a tearful voice that they have fallen into evil days: from one hell into another. The first hell promised chances of deliverance, for you get a bullet and are no more. The second was a smouldering pyre; it consumed you in slow degrees. There were tears in Ali's eyes, when he gave me details about the plight of Pandits in Jammu. Years of living together with Pandits have not been in vain, after all. But it is the likes of Ali who created conditions that forced the Pandits to flee their

homes. When I taunt Ali with this, he gives no answer. He just hugs me and says sorry. But are there other Muslims like Ali who can say so? No. Here we have to contend with a paradox. Muslims are both soft and hard; they blow hot and cold. They have become dangerously inconsistent. When alone, they are gentle like pliant cows; when together, they howl like ferocious jackals. There must be a problem somewhere. I am no sociologist or psychologist. I know my Ali is an angel. He hugs me again and says that he is glad to see me in my home. Here, he can weep with me; if I go to Jammu, he can only weep for me. "Which is better?" I ask him. He considers it almost like a Socratic dilemma. When the judges decreed that he should die, he bade them good-bye, and said that he was going to die and they, to live. Nobody could say who was better off, he or the judges. Terrorists have superseded the gods. They not only issue decrees, but they also kill.

Should I prepare for my slow death in Jammu or an instant one in my home? I seek Ali's help to find an answer. Ali fails me. That is why he is speechless and looks gloomy and sad. For he knows our fates have turned out to be different because our faiths are different. But our faiths have not been of our making; we did not will them. He was born a Muslim and I a Hindu. Our fates were determined at the time of our birth. But Ali's brethren are trying to carry this difference to its extreme limits by intervening forcibly into the natural course of events to give it a direction that was not there before. The position now is that if you are born a Pandit, then you have no right to shape your fate in Kashmir. If you are a Muslim, then you may.

Of late, they have changed this too. Some Muslims have also been killed because they wanted to do things their way. That is why I ask Ali, "Are both of us trapped?" He is forthright, and says no. He readily concedes that my situation is worse, for I have no options here. I have to get out of the range of militant fire. That is possible only by leaving the Valley and going to Jammu or to any other place beyond that.

I hear Makhanji stirring in his room. Is he dreaming of freedom in Jammu? Poor Makhanji! Don't know whether to weep for him or just laugh the whole thing out. I wish Ali was here to help me get out of my dilemma.

41

God helps those who help themselves. We were taught to believe in this. But are the Pandits in a position to help themselves? I think, they are not. History is against them, has been against them for several hundred years. Ages ago, they had their glorious days in Kashmir, but for centuries, they have been on the receiving end, especially after the coming of Islam in the Valley. Several eyewitness' accounts tell us how a massive use of the sword by their oppressors forced them to embrace the new faith. Those days there was no escape route to Jammu, though some people did manage to flee the Valley by scaling hills and mountains and facing endless troubles. Some even died on their way. But for a vast majority of them the options got narrowed down to two: to merge into the new faith or to face extinction. Those who had nerve, embraced death; those who felt weak, embraced Islam. And it lasted for many many years. The lure of the faith was not as important as the

pressure applied by the rulers to force people into submission. Largely because of this, the Pandits could not weld themselves into a community that could act in unison; they learnt to survive only as individuals. Each one of them thinks that he is his own leader; he has to decide things for himself. This may make them strong and resourceful, but it weakens their cause. They have no voice to influence public opinion or government policy; this has forced them to run away from the Valley like wet rats. Because of this, every other community inside and outside the Valley feels that we do not matter. So why raise their voice or even shed a tear for them?

42

Makhanji left today for Jammu. It was pointless to persuade him to stay. He was scared out of his wits. Besides, his family was already there. I did not ask him what kind of life he expected to live there. I am sure he knew about it. In spite of this, he had made up his mind, and that sometimes helps. I have not been so lucky. I am always caught between doing or not doing, going or not going.

Sunil is still out there. I have no way of knowing what happened to him and his people, as he calls them. When he finally came after several days, it was with no good news. When I said to him that he had virtually taken over the role of a messenger of death and ceased to bring even a bit of good news, he laughed. The very next moment, he became dreadfully serious and said "I am surprised that you still hope for good news in these days of turmoil. You should be prepared to make a move, for now I see no chance for us here."

I could not believe my ears that it was Sunil speaking in this dark vein. Our battle, he said, was already lost. And then he gave me the stunning news that all the Pandits of his village had left. He himself had packed them off. When I asked him what actually triggered the move, he said that Shabir had advised him to take them out of the village as fast as he could.

This happened somewhat abruptly, though signs of their impending movement from there were already quite visible. In the post-Pir era, his walks with his brethren, which he had initiated to register their presence in the Village, had virtually stopped because the Muslims had shown reluctance even to acknowledge their greetings. Their show of strength degenerated into an empty ritual. Even the shopkeepers hesitated to sell things to them. The Pandits were totally alienated. Though there were no signs of open hostility, it was clear that the Muslims resented their presence. Increasingly, the Pandits feared for their lives. What if they were attacked? With no police force to protect them against any assault, what would they do?

It was their good luck that Shabir was there. One day, late in the evening, he dashed to Sunil's home to urge him to quit before anything untoward happened to him and his people. When Sunil dismissed his fears as unfounded, Shabir became grave and whispered into his ear that something would happen by the end of the next day. This forced Sunil to take him seriously, but he felt helpless, because it was not possible to move out of the village at such a short notice, and he made this plain to him. Shabir did not consider it a problem, for he was resourceful, and promised him that he would make all the necessary arrangements for their safe exit from the place;

all he wanted to ensure was their readiness to leave. Soon after his departure, he got the Pandits ready. When it was almost midnight, Shabir came with two empty trucks. All the Pandits took off for their new life in Udhampur, with whatever they could salvage from their homes at that dark hour. I was surprised to hear about the change from Jammu to Udhampur. Sunil said the government had set up camps outside the town of Udhampur for those villagers who had nowhere to go.

When I asked him why he did not go along with them, he gave me a look steeped in love, and said that he did not want to leave me alone. I was the only one of his people left now.

43

Today I managed to go to my office after a long time, because relaxation in the curfew hours gave enough time to people to attend to their offices. Almost all of my Muslim colleagues were surprised to see me. One of them spoke to me in a low tone, almost into my ear, that he had thought that I was already in Jammu. And I wondered: the Muslims have already accepted that Jammu is the only destiny we have. When I told him that the city meant nothing to me, because Srinagar was my home city, he did not look particularly happy, but did not dare say anything. I told everybody I met that they should not expect me in the office if the curfew timings did not allow me enough time for coming and going back. This, they said, was no problem; they knew that I lived on the farthest fringe of the city and public transport was not always available.

Although the government had announced the lifting of the day curfew, it did not necessarily mean the resumption of normalcy, for curfew was declared not only by the government but also by militant groups and organizations. The latter type has a new name: civil curfew. It is observed with greater rigour than the curfew imposed by the government. One can afford to take liberty with a policeman but not with a terrorist.

Last year when the terrorists decreed that there should be blackout on 15 August in the city, nobody dared to oppose it. On that night, darkness stretched to its farthest limits in the city of Srinagar. I guess it would have been the same in other parts of the Valley as well.

After the dark night was over, a friend told me in the morning how his house got damaged because the wife of his tenant switched on the light of the lobby of her floor for no more than a minute. No sooner the light spread on the glass window than there was a loud crash. A huge stone had been hurled at the window. She was saved from getting it on her head because of the protective covering of the iron grill. People know very well by now that the command of the militants, in fact, of all non-governmental agencies, has the force of law; any violation can invite severe punitive action.

One could, however, stay away from work in offices and organizations, no matter public or private, without inviting any problems. When I said to my colleagues that I might not be able to come regularly, they simply said that I could stay away as long as I liked. Everybody knows that the authority of the government is virtually non-existent. Last year, when offices, educational institutions, and commercial and public establishments remained closed for days together, nobody

looked bothered. This was when the militants had not even made a public appearance.

On my way back to my home that day, I had to reckon with another difficulty. I had just got into a bus when the driver asked us to get down. On being asked about the reason, he merely said that the transport would be off for the rest of the day. Outside, I learnt that there had been incidents of firing at two places in the city, in which several people had died on the spot. So we had to walk.

I had walked for barely ten minutes when I saw a huge procession of people at the main intersection heading towards the centre of the city. I decided to let the procession pass, but it was of no help, for the procession looked interminable. My neighbour told me that it spanned a whole mile. To reach home, I had no option but to join it. In fact, everybody who wanted to reach his/her home had to do so. Like a swollen river, the procession engulfed everything and everybody that came in its way.

It was actually a protest march against the death of people killed in police firing; but within minutes it became a political rally in motion. One could hear the roar of slogans of all kinds: of freedom, of a Muslim order, of the bravery of the mujahideen. Men, women, and children came out of their houses to greet people and join the roar. When I joined the procession, it already looked like a mass of highly excited people. I felt frightened. If the crowd willed it, it could do anything and everything, ransack all the houses and put the entire city on fire. I felt sweat inside my clothes, though it was no season for perspiring. A frightful thought also crossed my mind. What if they knew that I was a Pandit; they could finish

me off simply by trampling over my body. Assailed by the destructive potential of the crowd, I struggled harder than before to get out of it. Seeing a small side street, which opened into another major road of the city, I moved into it and ran for my dear life.

Never before had I seen such a large assemblage of highly excited and enthusiastic people in my life. That it was in energetic motion, like an overflowing river, made it look very menacing. There was so much fire in people's eyes and such energy in their gestures that anything could have happened at any time. Mercifully, nothing happened. When I reached home, Sunil was waiting for me. He could make out that I looked shaken. When I gave him the details of the volatile procession, he said that such processions would become a common occurrence. And if the government imposes curfew to put a stop to them because of their disruptive nature, then people are resentful. It is also true that when there is no curfew, people are constantly on the look out for any excuse, an incident of actual firing or just a rumour, to mobilize people for disrupting normal life. This is a part of the new pattern of our lives these days.

Where will it end, I ask Sunil. He looks thoughtful but does not say anything. When I search his eyes, I remember that he has already answered this question. The government is powerless to act because it virtually surrendered its position on that fateful day when it let the militants make deep inroads in the hearts of the people and thus gain a secure place in popular imagination.

44

That fateful day began as an ordinary day in December 1989. But by that time, militancy had gained widespread public attention in the city and other parts of the Valley, for the militants had succeeded in making people comply with their wishes and orders. Without coming to the fore, they stopped people from going to their work-places at will, made men and women observe new codes of dress and conduct, banned the sale and drinking of liquor in public places, and even instructed people on how and where to invest their money. Their word, even though transmitted orally, had the force of writ. Non-compliance invited severe punitive action. A defaulter could lose his money, his property, even his life. Shocked and confused, the general public had an uneasy time; every passing day brought new and unexpected changes. An invisible hand governed their lives.

When almost everyone was wondering why the administrative machinery of the state was not doing enough to counter the growing influence of militants in the sphere of public life, people heard with hushed silence that the police had finally swung into action. In a bold and daring manoeuvre they arrested five top-notch, front-line leaders who had a hand in the killings of several ordinary citizens, police personnel of various ranks, and intelligence officers. This lent an extraordinary edge to the efforts of the government to fight the growing militant power. Many people were convinced that the problem that had been bothering them for the past several months would now be resolved; some considered it a major achievement, almost a clinching blow to the spread of

militancy, and viewed it with great relief. In this atmosphere of hope and expectation, nobody suspected that it would provide the basis for a series of dramatic happenings, which eventually made the people look at the movement launched by the militants from an entirely new perspective.

Things headed towards a dramatic climax when, almost like a bolt out of the blue, it became known that some militant group had kidnapped Rubiya Saeed, a young medical student. Kidnappings of government officials and civilians with political affiliations had become quite common by then, but the abduction of a young girl was something unheard of, and beyond anybody's belief. Besides, Rubiya was no ordinary being; she was the daughter of the Home Minister of India.

First reactions to the news of her kidnapping were of shock, fear, and disgust. Everybody considered it shocking because it involved a young woman; it was also stunning because the militants chose a prime target that could invite drastic action.

Within hours, the militants let it be known that Rubiya would be released only if the government let off the five militants who had been arrested a few days ago. This set the stage for the high drama that proved a turning point in the spread of militancy in the state. With the Chief Minister in some foreign country, the state administration was too confused to deal with the challenge posed by the militants. Rubiyas's father, quite understandably, was worried and concerned. The Prime Minister of the country got deeply involved in the problem, and the government in New Delhi expressed deep concern over developments in the city. This,

everybody felt, was a crucial test for the government, which, unfortunately, it bungled.

I distinctly remember the angry mood of the public over the incident. It resulted in a widespread condemnation of the act because the public at large thought it highly improper that womenfolk be drawn into the messy business of settling political scores. Several organizations, including the ones that were sympathetic to the militants, condemned it in very strong terms. Had the government shown wisdom, even commonsense, it could have cashed in on this public resentment against the foul deed. Unfortunately, it did not. It only showed extraordinary signs of nerves. Cabinet ministers from the central government poured into the city and hectic behind-the-doors activities got into motion. Rumours proliferated at an alarming rate. The list of intermediaries and negotiators involved in settling the issue between the government and the militant organizations became longer and longer. There was, however, no indication of the government's resolve to deal with the militants with a firm hand. With every passing hour, the tension became unbearable.

The public grew excited when it became known that the government was seriously considering the option of accepting the demands of the militants and seeking Rubiya's release in exchange of the five dreaded militants. Crowds of people positioned themselves at key points in the city, days and nights before the actual release of the militants. It appeared as if chaos was let loose on the streets of Srinagar. There was fear, excitement, and even hope, though somewhat vague and undefined.

While the negotiations were on, the militants took special care to intensify their propaganda, to inform the public that Rubiya was in safe hands and in no way would she be harmed. She was their honoured guest, and as dear to them as she was to everybody else. Her abduction was only an unavoidable necessity. The official media vied with them for keeping the people informed; reports about her well-being were issued periodically like the health bulletins of a sick leader.

Contrary to what many people expected, the government finally caved in to the blackmail. The militants were released and Rubiya went back into her father's safe arms, providing a happy ending to a clumsily handled story.

Very soon, however, it became widely known that the action of the militants was actually a carefully orchestrated charade, the handiwork of several people, including those who had clout in the government. The whole drama, woven with utmost care, had been enacted to produce a desired ending. Scores of people knew in detail the whole sequence of events, from the day she was abducted to the day of her final release, as part of a perfectly rehearsed plot. They also knew that it was a publicity stunt devised by the militants to capture popular attention. Only the authorities did not seem to know anything. Because of this, the Government of India emerged in a poor light. I remember how a close Muslim acquaintance told me everything about it, even to the minutest detail. He claimed to know the names and addresses of all the people involved in it, the places where Rubiya had stayed during the days of her detention, how and when she was taken from one place to another, and also the number of families involved in the entire operation.

The vital question here is not whether what my acquaintance told me was correct or not, for I have no way of checking it, but whether there was a real threat to Rubiya's life. The answer is an emphatic no. Everybody knew that militants would not dare even to touch her. Killing her would have been a colossal blunder and risked public anger, which would harm their image and their cause. If the man in the street knew it so well, there is no reason why the government should not have known this. Without assessing the situation as a whole, it yielded to the militant pressure. The result was that it lost the first and the most crucial round of its battle against militancy. Many people, I distinctly remember, were not happy with what the government had done.

Contrary to what the man in the street had felt earlier, he now felt that the militants did not do any wrong by kidnapping a young woman. Even those who viewed the whole affair within the strict confines of the Muslim faith changed their views. Considering what the militants finally achieved, people became their admirers, and revised their opinion on the requirements of faith. They got to know and understand the use and value of strategy for realizing one's ends. One had only to see the streets of Srinagar on the day of the militants' release to watch the changed public mood. There was celebration and joy everywhere. People stopped cars and vehicles to ask for money for celebrating the event. And everybody gave liberally. Even those who were reluctant to give parted with large amounts to avoid public wrath. I myself saw a government car with a flag of authority stop before a small group of people, and a top official of the central government, who had come to assess the situation in the city, open his purse to them. The

fires of festivities spread into all parts of the city and turned the night into one of light pink, dispelling its darkness and gloom.

The leaders who had been released became heroes. There was a radical turnabout in people's perception of their aims, aspirations, and methods. They made things happen; they could be trusted; they deserved respect even though their methods for attaining their ends looked too radical to conventional minds. In comparison to them, the old leaders were mere talkers.

The release of the militants was a big boost to the militant cause. From that day, as people were to say later, militancy made a grand entry into the public heart. Whatever misgivings the people had had earlier were thrown overboard. And all because the state and central governments acted in a clumsy and irresponsible manner, let down its police force and shattered their morale. This was to have a severe impact on the efficiency of the security forces in the days to come.

45

My Muslim neighbour, who has found a new interest in me, often comes to my place to keep me company and, what he humorously calls, to keep my heart in its place. During the time he is with me, he often comments on what is happening around. He has a good understanding of the political developments in the state and his judgment too is quite sound. He tells me that militancy in the Valley may seem a new phenomenon, but it is not all that new. Its seeds, in fact, were sown right at the time of the partition of the country in

1947, when Pakistan was defeated in realizing what it called its rightful claim over Kashmir. Smarting under its pain, it worked hard to make sure that things did not remain stable in the Valley. Just when the Maharaja of the state was vacillating over the issue of accession, Pakistan sent its forces in the guise of tribal invaders to capture the state. The Indian armed forces rushed in to repel their attack, but a part of Kashmir came under the control of Pakistan, and became the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Pakistanis tried once again in 1965 to send infiltrators to create difficulties for the government in Kashmir by spreading disturbances, but failed to make any gains. In fact, the police succeeded in capturing most of them. In 1971, Pakistan was not only routed in the battlefield, but also got dismembered, resulting in the creation of the new country of Bangladesh. It was unfortunate that India failed to capitalize on its strong position at that time. Mrs. Gandhi was too gracious to Bhutto and literally let the controversy over Kashmir remain alive. On all three occasions, the policy of the Pakistanis was to infiltrate its people into the valley to create disturbances, but now it decided on the new plan of involving the Kashmiris into their tactical war against India.

Through a carefully devised strategy in which money and religion were combined to create a hard core of highly motivated terrorists from among the local people, the Pakistani intelligence agencies planted the seeds of a new battle, with the aim of embarrassing India among the nations of the world. The strategy was to disrupt normal life in the Valley, to create an atmosphere of fear and confusion and a state of non-functionality. Through their local agents, they were to prevent

people from attending to their normal work, spread disaffection among people of different communities, and attack and destroy communication links, radio and television stations, and other vital installations of defence and national security. All this was to be publicized by the Pakistani media in a big way, to attract the attention of the world to the unrest in Kashmir. Interpreting it as a symptom of internal discontentment among its people, Pakistan, at an appropriate moment, was to intervene militarily, in a more open way, and thus revenge itself against India. But Zia-ul-Haq's unexpected death disrupted the entire plan. It also led to unforeseen changes in the character of militancy in the Valley.

The most direct and dangerous effect of Zia's death was the beginning of a phase of instability and confusion in Pakistan, which had its effect on Kashmir too. The militant groups lost their main inspiration and direction. In a large measure, this gave a rudderless twist to militancy in the Valley. All the young men of the state who had been brainwashed in Pakistan and trained to be disciplined soldiers and not to do anything on their own but to follow orders from authorities across the border, suddenly found themselves free to do anything they wished. The heady excitement of power through the gun proved too much for some of them, especially the ones who were young and inexperienced. Emptying the guns of their bullets and spreading terror became synonymous with a romantic pastime.

I don't know whether I should believe what my friend described at great length, but he was sure that this was not the direction which militancy was to have taken in the Valley. For several more months, militants were to maintain a sort of

low profile. Their aim was to accomplish pre-determined targets, such as instilling a sense of discipline among the people of the Valley, keeping them tuned to reject their present political set up, and resorting to sporadic acts of firing, and thus keeping the movement alive and going. Along with this, efforts had to be made to involve large numbers of people in acts of sabotage and disturbances. Only afterwards was it to change into a kind of mass uprising, involving more and more people, but under the guidance of trained personnel, to achieve tangible gains. But all this suffered a premature rupture because of the sudden loss of its architect in Pakistan.

Much of what he said made sense to me.

46

Whatever people may think of militancy now, and whatever their perception of its desirability and effectiveness, and whether or not they approve of its viability, its objectives, and its strategies, everybody believes that it has come to stay. The release of the five militants gave it a new impetus and fired the imagination of the ordinary people. The happenings in the winter of 1990-91 confirmed that its character had changed. I was not in the city then, but Girija and the children have frightful memories of the night of 19 January.

Around the time the clock struck the midnight hour, almost like a loud explosion, the loudspeakers fixed on all the mosques of Kashmir Valley blared forth the slogan *"Hum Kya Chhahte? Azadi"*. It was so sudden and unexpected that people ran out of their beds with sleepy eyes to see what was

happening. As soon as they got to know that it was a call from the militants, enthusiastic crowds poured out on the streets. They invited, even ordered, others to come out and join the chorus. In every locality, they pounded the compound doors of all the houses and pulled out every able-bodied person on the street.

It was a carefully planned imaginative use of the devices of mass media. Pre-recorded cassettes were played from the mosques to create the illusion of big crowds on the streets. The people who heard them inside their homes thought that they were not the only ones who were not there. When they came out and found what it was, they forced others to do the same. So the playing of cassettes helped to realise in actuality what was recorded there: the booming voice of slogan-raising crowds.

I know that in my locality, and in many other localities, the Pandits had come out to join the Muslims; at some places, they were forced to do so. Some even delivered speeches to make common cause with the Muslims, pleading for a meaningful socio-political change. But after the masses were sufficiently mobilised, there was a perceptible shift in the Muslim viewpoint. It became clear that they wanted to establish a new order: Nizame Mustapha, which automatically left the non-Muslims out of their social fold. When it was followed by the selective killings of people from the minority community and the slogans of the people acquired a loud and clear religious ring, waves of panic and fear spread among the non-Muslims, but particularly among the Pandits. Eventually, it led to their migration to other parts of the state and beyond.

At first, this looked very confusing, but gradually, the Muslims viewed the fleeing of Pandits as one of the early gains of militancy. That is why they took very unkindly to people who tried to return. When they understood fully that a sizable chunk of people had been banished, almost forever, they also saw that it opened up the possibilities of resultant economic gains. By and by the movement acquired a definite fundamentalist character and there were rumours of mercenaries from several Muslim countries joining the ranks of the Muslims of the Valley.

Girija had braved it all in my absence. She had shown exemplary courage in staying on, for soon after the January episode almost all our Pandit neighbours had run away from there. So when I joined her, she was relieved, but sad too. The children clamoured for their freedom—freedom from the new oppressive climate of hate and fear. Overnight, as it were, long years of fellowship and association with the Muslims were being re-appraised in an entirely new light. History was being reviewed and revised from a new perspective with new assumptions, some stated and some unstated.

I find it difficult to accept this change in the behaviour and thinking of Muslims. But my Muslim friend makes me see it from a different perspective, when he says that the Muslims too did not have it easy in Kashmir. Their leaders, particularly Shiekh Abdullah, took control of their lives and freedom to realize their own ambitions. He told me plainly that they had been manipulated and betrayed. If thousands of sensible people sided with the militants now, it was because they found, how correctly I cannot be sure, some outlet for their frustration. I think it is both sad and tragic, that people's

patience is tested for so long that they become desperate and reckless. I am quite certain that the tactics of the militants and the kind of orientation they are giving to the entire movement is not right, for they are playing a kind of suicidal game which also necessitates innocent murders. But this is because they have had their problems too, so my friend says.

47

In 1947, Abdullah was a man of history. He commanded the respect of all the people of the state because he raised his voice against the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh, who had inherited the throne of the state of Jammu and Kashmir from his father. Like almost all other Maharajas of India, he was dictatorial in his ways, and given to a life of luxury, but in certain respects, he was quite progressive. He instituted compulsory education for children of the state and virtually had them dragged out from their homes to attend school. But when it came to exercising power, he was undemocratic. This gave Abdullah the right kind of impetus to launch a movement against his autocratic rule. In this effort, he received the support of all the enlightened groups of the Valley, which included a large number of educated and emancipated Pandits. Many people believe that they were instrumental in helping him to come out of his early communal moorings, for they made him understand that his fight against the Maharaja was not a communal affair, and could be organized on secular lines. The result was that in a short period of time, he became the undisputed leader of the people, with impeccable credentials.

Unfortunately for the people of Kashmir, the Shiekh became a new kind of despot. I have heard several elderly people from among the Muslims and Pandits say that he was too much into himself. Though he made the people of the state hold on to democratic and secular ideals and gave them even a measure of self-respect, he could not do so for long. Within a few years, he let his dictatorial tendencies invade the public domain.

Nobody can deny that he played a key role in the actual realization of the freedom of the state and was appropriately chosen to assume the reins of power, but very soon he showed that even a popularly elected leader could be as autocratic as a hereditary Maharaja. In the first-ever Assembly elections in the state, all the candidates of his party got elected unopposed; there was not even any token opposition. Things did not stop there. Any alternative voices were nipped in the bud. Seeing his attitude and his ways, some people from within and outside the country made him dream of becoming the virtual sultan of Kashmir, with a harem too, for his weakness for women had become quite well known by then. He was also fond of rich food, and several people made inroads into the body politic through his stomach. His arrest in 1953, though mired in controversy, was nevertheless occasioned by the dangerous leanings of his super-human aspirations. His subsequent release after years of imprisonment and his signing of the accord with Mrs. Gandhi confirmed that he loved power above everything else. That is why everybody now considers his post-1975 rule, when corruption in public life touched new heights, as the most dismal phase of his career.

The weakest feature of his governance in Kashmir was his dreadful inconsistency. He made it a point to speak about the state's accession to the Indian Union at every conceivable opportunity in different voices and tones in Kashmir, in Jammu, and in New Delhi, as if that was the best way to be in the news. There was a great deal of mischief in this. The Shiekh used the issue of accession as a kind of lever to pressurise the leadership in the centre and to get even with them. It also bode a kind of threat, that if he were not allowed to have his way, he would create problems. The main beneficiary of this was the pro-Pakistani lobby in Kashmir, for its members always quoted him in support of their demands. By keeping things poised dangerously on the fringes of ambiguity, he also created confusion in the minds of people. For they were never sure whether the accession was provisional or permanent. As my friend is never tired of stating in a rich suggestive metaphor: he gave to the people of Kashmir the torments of Tantalus. He brought them to the brink of hope and fruition, but never gave them the chance to experience them in full measure. Had he been a true leader, he would have made it clear to the people that the political future of Kashmir had been settled, leaving them free to devote their energies to solving social and economic problems. Had such a thing happened, the state of Jammu and Kashmir would have been highly developed, peaceful and prosperous. But that was not to be. The people were kept so busy with needless political squabbling that they never paid enough attention to the iniquity that was eating into the socio-economic fabric of the society. Because of mismanagement of funds, which came in great abundance from the central government especially after

the arrest of the Shiekh, there also grew in the state, but particularly in the Valley, a powerful group of people who never let anything happen. For, any change, they knew it well, would go against them. I sometimes feel sad that, instead of understanding these things, the Muslims should think that a fistful of Pandits made all the difference to their fortunes in the Valley.

People's dismay over the leaders they got and also the leaders who were thrown up by their confused thinking, can be judged by an incident that I consider quite important, though it may never figure in books of history. At one time, an English movie was screened in one of the cinema halls of the city in regular shows. The proprietors rightly sensed that it could be slated for three shows a day, instead of the normal seven o'clock evening show that was reserved for English movies, because it was a commercial success. It was called "Omar Mukhtar," a powerful dramatisation of the story of a leader who spent his entire life away from the comfort of his home, to keep himself safe from his enemies, so that he could work for the liberation of his people from tyrants.

The film graphically illustrated how he toiled ceaselessly for the restoration of their rights. I have a faint memory of what it was like, but I do remember the powerful acting of Anthony Quinn in what I consider one of his best roles. The film drew large crowds, became a talk of the city, and was eagerly watched even by those who did not know a word of English. It had an unbelievably unexpected impact on the people; it made them think seriously what a true leader is like, and how unfortunate they were in the kind of leaders they had amongst them. Because of its popularity and the kind of

impression it was making on people, the movie was withdrawn. This gave a serious jolt to public expectation, resulting in violent protests, which almost caused a riot. I regard it as a significant moment because for the first time in my memory, people showed signs of maturity and a critical awareness that was not in evidence before.

All the leaders of Kashmir, including the Shiekh, were seen a little more closely and critically by the people. Earlier the Shiekh had been lionised and worshipped blindly; now they saw that like many other ordinary mortals he too had feet of clay. With every passing day, they saw more of his unsteady gait. Some of them had a tough time getting over their dilemmas, for they could not totally gloss over the idealism of his earlier days and the direction he gave to their aspirations, which stood him in good stead throughout, and partially accounted for his support base. But the Shiekh was always one up on his people. He had mastered their pulse. He knew that Kashmiris are emotional, so he resorted to the art of manipulating them. Whenever he sensed that his popularity was waning, he resorted to emotional blackmail. In the last election that he won before his death, which people still quote as the one and only fair election in the Valley, he assiduously cultivated public support by feigning that he was on his deathbed. He and his supporters appealed to people by reminding them of what he had done for them in the past.

In his later years, the Shiekh also used manipulative tactics to stick to power. People could see that he caused fissures in the ruling party by promoting his son Farooq over many senior leaders. This was one of the most tragic things to happen to Kashmir and Kashmiris. By creating groupism within the

National Conference, he created a political vacuum in the state, which contributed in a large measure to the rise of militancy in the Valley.

48

Sunil is still with me. I can sense that he is restless. The world outside has not changed even a bit. We still get large patches of curfew that prevent people from going to work. Schools and colleges are still closed. Nobody can possibly say how long it is going to be like this. I have just got to know through a friend that my wife is well. It was possible through an intricate telephone call that passed through several hands. The postal system is hardly functional these days. We are already in the vicious grip of non-functionality. Every disturbance causes deaths; every death leads to a hartal and every hartal becomes the cause of fresh disturbances and a new round of deaths. Confrontations between the people and police are on the increase.

The militants have kept up with their part of the work. They hunt police and security forces; they also ensure that the Pandits too are killed every day. Even the BBC reports that more and more Pandit families are fleeing the Valley. Some people have started accusing the governor of the state of encouraging people to leave their homes in the Valley, which I fail to understand. Does one leave one's home just because somebody tells him to do so? Is it such an easy choice to make? I, for one, have not been able to make any decision. I am not even sure of whether I should leave or not. What surprises me most about this accusation is that it is leveled by all kinds of

people: the militants, their supporters, and also by those who are sitting comfortably in their houses, either in high-protected zones of the city here or somewhere in the capital of the country.

49

Sunil and I decided to go out for a change, to find how things looked like there. This was possible because he had his scooter with him. Out on the road, we soon discovered that it was one of those semi-curfew days, a day not sufficiently labelled; nobody was sure whether there was curfew or whether only the public transport was off the road. Though we saw only a few vehicles around, the number of pedestrians was unusually large. In no time would they swell into a crowd.

At one point, we waded through a thick stream of people, who seemed least bothered about the outcome of their actions. After a little while, we reached a blind corner where a small crowd forced us to stop and get off the scooter. We got worried because the street ahead was totally deserted. We also saw a section of the crowd in a nearby lane busy pelting stones at a house for no apparent reason. In our anxiety to get out from there, we did not even try to find out what it was all about. Everything was so confusing. Suddenly someone shouted to everybody else: take out petrol from the oil tank of the scooter. In no time, the scooter lay supine on the road. We were shocked and jittery and almost paralyzed. Suddenly, another voice shouted to stop it all. I saw a smile on the face of the speaker, and he winked at us, or so it seemed to me. With unbelievable agility, we brought the scooter to its normal

position. Sunil gave it a forceful kick and I jumped on to the pillion. I even heard somebody in the crowd say that we were their own people.

Just when we felt that we were out of trouble, somebody pulled my leg and prevented me from holding on to the pillion seat. At first, I thought that it was a playful prank meant to amuse the crowd, but by the increasing pressure that he put on me, it became clear that it was no joke. I had to struggle hard to extricate myself from the clutches of that person, using all the force I could muster. When the scooter got going, I looked back to see the reaction of the crowd. The faces of the people did not look particularly pleasing; some, in fact, looked perplexed, as if they had lost something, maybe a god-sent chance to beat somebody.

Right then I noticed a big stone sailing towards us. I ducked in time to see it hit Sunil's helmet. The impact shook him a little and a big scar appeared on it. The very thought of being hit by the stone made me faint. After successfully negotiating this sticky bend, which could have resulted in anything, a loss of leg or head, we were stopped by the police. Before they could ask us any questions, we flipped our identity cards. Satisfied, they let us go.

Before proceeding, we asked them about the presence of the crowd with which we had a narrow shave. They said it was there because they had been prevented from setting ablaze a nearby house, which, according to them, was a shrine associated with a venerable saint of Kashmir. When we returned to our place, we considered ourselves lucky to be at home. I realised for the umpteenth time that the world outside was truly dangerous and hostile for the likes of me.

50

Today Mohinder rushed in to tell me, in a very alarming tone, that I have become too visible and vulnerable. It surprised me because, except for yesterday, when I went out after weeks, I have rarely moved out of my house and hardly seen any people. An old friend, one of the earliest acquaintances I made in this new place, supplies me with milk and vegetables, which keep me going, and I am spared the need for moving out on the road to buy things on my own. I am pretty certain that many of my friends and acquaintances are not even aware of my being in the city. I told these things to Mohinder to convince him that his fear was baseless and unfounded. But he was in no mood to listen to me, for he had come with a made-up mind.

In a very sombre tone he said that the people who mattered knew that I was here. They had complete information about my movements; they even knew the number of times I had gone out of my home and the people I had talked with. This really was scary. He said the militants have an extensive network of spies, who do not look like spies. For the person who gives me my daily milk or the person with whom I talk in confidence could also be an informer. He may have nothing against me; he may not even wish me ill or see me come to harm, but this does not prevent him from undertaking the work of gathering information about me and my activities, which he considers a responsibility he owes to his people. In fact, this is how he combines business with duty. Thus, my milkman serves me, his customer of long standing as well as his community. It

raises him above suspicion and makes him an effective informer. This, I felt, was truly astounding!

Mohinder said that there were scores of people like my milkman, people who worked in government offices, private organisations, and even those who did the meanest of private jobs. I suddenly realised that maybe my colleagues and friends too have an obligation to meet: to inform the appropriate groups about my movements, even about my opinions on current politics. When I told Mohinder that I could hardly pose any threat to any person, he said nothing in response. He, however, said that keeping track of the Pandits and their movements was a policy adopted by the people in charge of affairs because they did not favour taking risks with anybody. Then he gave me an example that was really stunning.

In one locality of the city, there lived an old Pandit couple. Because their children lived outside the state, they decided to leave the city for good. But they wanted to leave only after selling their house, which, under the present circumstances, was almost impossible. The old man broached the subject to his retired Muslim friend and colleague who visited them almost everyday. He undertook to help them find a buyer. When he spoke to his wife about it, she suggested that they buy it for their daughter, to which he readily agreed.

Next day, he met the Pandits in their home, and conveyed his decision to buy it for his daughter, which made them happy. It so happened that while they were talking about it in the porch of their house, a woman who came to pluck grass and weeds from their garden for her cow was busy with her job. Since she was a daily visitor, they were not even conscious of her presence. The deal was finalised and they worked out the

mode of payment that would not attract attention. Both of them knew that it was risky to sell or buy Pandit property.

A day after this, the friend of the Pandits, a very respectable member of the community, was visited by a small group of Muslims. In one voice and with appropriate loudness, they criticised him severely for acting against the interests of the movement, and reminded him that in this hour of trial he was not to think of petty private interests, but the larger interest of the community. They made it clear to him that the house of his friend was already his because the Pandit would be forced to leave the place without selling it. So there was no need to acquire it through a bargain.

Next day, he told his Pandit friend to forget about selling the house and to prepare for his departure instead because he had already attracted the attention of the militants, which did not augur well for him. When they tried to figure out how anybody could have known about what they talked in their house, they remembered the woman in the garden.

After hearing this story, I saw the prison walls closing on me. The images of all the people I had met and talked with during the past two weeks flashed past me. I tried hard to remember if I had said anything against anybody or commented on any situation or incident which could be construed as an affront and invite retaliatory action, but nothing came to my mind. I told Mohinder that I had neither done nor spoken anything against the de facto power structures. He just laughed. The militants, he told me humorously, were under no obligation to investigate charges against me for getting rid of me. I could be liquidated even on grounds of suspicion. Before I could respond to this

frightful prospect, he spoke to me about what his aunt had overheard near the milk vendor's shop.

The milk vendor's shop was always crowded with people waiting for their turn because its owner Rahmana had built a reputation for selling unadulterated milk, a rarity in the city. As one of his esteemed customers, Mohinder's aunt received special treatment from him. He often requested other customers to make way for her to reduce her waiting time. That particular day, when she was near the shop, she overheard people talking about the diminishing number of Pandits in the locality. One person in the group observed that one Pandit was still there in the farthest corner of the locality. Mohinder's aunt understood that it was a reference to me. When somebody else intervened to say that he was a gentleman and incapable of harm, he was severely reprimanded by another one, who looked like the leader of the group. He said that in these times, every person, gentleman or no gentleman, was a potential enemy, and they needed to keep a watchful eye on him. This led to an animated discussion, in which they discussed the cases of several gentleman Pandits who, to use their colourful phraseology, had already been sent to their heavenly abode. As if to assure themselves, all of them agreed that the solitary Pandit posed no threat; he was a blank cheque that they could cash whenever they needed. Upon hearing this, Mohinder's aunt had rushed to his place to tell him what she had heard, and to urge me that the time for my departure had finally come.

For a moment, I felt the noose tightening around my neck. But the very next moment, I remembered my grandmother and her theory of malignant stars. I told Mohinder that if my

days were really numbered, then death would overtake me anywhere, here or at any other place. Here I would die by a bullet; in Jammu, I could die of heatstroke, like my uncle, or of snakebite, like the cousin of my friend. Mohinder glared at me in bewilderment. Had I succeeded in silencing him? For the time being, perhaps, I had. Fatalism has its uses, I realised.

Am I really in danger? Do I need to fear for my life? Should I take Mohinder's warning seriously? I remembered my doctor-friend. He promptly complied with the wishes of his tormentors. Like him, a number of Pandits and their families left their homes because their Muslim friends urged them to leave; they feared for their lives. When the Pandits left, the very same people criticized them openly for leaving their homes. What was this? Concern, expediency, or treachery?

It is difficult to find a satisfactory answer. But I do remember the day when one of my Muslim friends felt worried because I greeted him on the road. Later, when we were safe from public gaze, he requested me not to speak to him in the presence of other people. He also said that I should try to understand the gravity of the situation. Any link with a Pandit could spell danger for him and his family.

This new knowledge is too painful. Have we already become dreadful monsters whose touch can threaten lives, or untouchables who should be shunned? .

51

I was trying hard to come to grips with my situation and to understand why things should have come to such a pass when I heard a loud noise of commotion outside. I looked

out the window. Just near the main road, there were small groups of people in heated conversation, some talking feverishly and some gesticulating wildly. It was a clear indication that something serious had happened; either some important leader had been arrested, or some militant leader killed. I rushed to find out from the people out there, and got the dreadful news of Maulvi Farooq's death. Two or three people had walked into his home and killed him right there.

The Maulvi lived in a relatively peaceful part of the city far away from the usual trouble spots. Besides, his house was almost like a fortress, with a high wall around it and a sentry guarding its main entrance round the clock. The most puzzling thing about the deed was its timing; he was killed in broad daylight in the early hours of the morning. I asked the person who told me about his death for details about his killers; he said he did not know. I looked at him in disbelief, but in no time understood why he said so. Overwhelmed by the Maulvi's sudden death, he had no thought for his killers.

A little later, I was in for more surprises when I found that several versions about the Maulvi's death were already in circulation. The official one stated that a couple of youths entered his house, shot him at a point blank range, and managed to escape. One of the functionaries of his household, probably his gardener, who let them in or saw them get in, for there was some confusion on this among my informers, had been arrested.

The non-official version, which grew louder with every passing hour, was that the agents of the central government had killed him; some even pointed their fingers at the governor of the state. But to cover it up, they then made it known as

the doing of the militants, to tarnish their image among the public and to put brakes on their rising popularity.

It was difficult to make out what had actually happened. Since the crowds outside my home remained active the whole day long, I could learn more details about the possible reasons of his death, but the controversy about his killers remained unresolved.

Another version related Maulvi's death to his increasing involvement in the current political situation. According to it, the government of India had been trying, and had even succeeded in its efforts, to seek his help and support for getting over the current political impasse created by the on-going activities of the militants. Since he commanded the support of an influential section of the population of the city and had also a solid political background, the government wanted to use his presence to fill the vacuum caused by the virtual disappearance of the known politicians of the state from the scene. To accomplish this, the central government expected him to step out into the open, create possibilities for a dialogue with the people who sympathized with the militants, and thus restore peace and normalcy in the Valley. This move was propelled by the assumption that the common people were sick of what was happening and would, therefore, welcome the initiative. Many people believed that the Maulvi had shown his willingness to accept the offer; some went to the extent of saying that an agreement had already been reached with him, and the modalities were being worked out.

Had this plan succeeded, militancy could have suffered a serious setback. Sensing this, the militant leaders had been left with no option but to finish him off. But they knew that it

would be risky to do so because his death at their hands would invite public wrath and they could lose their influence with the people. This obviously was a difficult position for them, but they had to do something before it was too late.

The militants therefore devised a plan to finish him off, but to put the blame on somebody else's head. So, after doing away with him, they mounted a vigorous propaganda campaign condemning the incident in the strongest possible words, calling it a dastardly act, and blaming it all on the central government. They made the people understand and accept, by the sheer force of their loud rhetoric, that the central government was the villain of the piece because it resorted to all possible nefarious tactics to deflect the attention of the people by dividing them. In its desperation, it did not desist from committing even cold-blooded murders. As a friend of the suffering people, the Maulvi had virtually paid with his life for them.

Because the militants had already found their way into the heart of the public, and also because hundreds of people had died in crossfire and encounters with the security forces, this view was readily taken in by a large number of people. Some, of course, did argue, almost in an under-breath, that the central government had nothing to gain by getting the Maulvi killed, but that was too rational a view to find large-scale acceptance in such highly emotional times.

That the Maulvi was dead was a sad thing, for he was quite young and not particularly guilty of any serious wrongdoings. He was the religious head of a large section of the Muslims, and lived in a big mansion just outside the gate of the University of Kashmir, very near the place where its vice-

chancellor and his assistant had been kidnapped earlier. Right from the time he had assumed the religious leadership of the Muslims, the Maulvi had always shown a tendency to join politics to counter the influence of the government run by the National Conference. Traditionally, this party, led by the Shiekh, called the party of shers, was opposed to the party led by the Maulvi's father, the bakras. At one time, the Maulvi even joined hands with the Janata party of Morarji Desai, to fight the might of the Shiekh, and to pull him down from his pedestal. Though he succeeded in giving the party a visible presence by organizing huge processions in the city, he could make no appreciable dent in the complex political scene of the state.

The Maulvi's problem was compounded by the fact that he had no reliable image among the people. As a religious leader, he had a large following, but as a politician, he, like several other leaders of Kashmir, was very inconsistent in his views and actions. If at one time he made highly controversial and inflammable statements about the state's accession with India, at other times he not only did not hesitate, he even volunteered to become an important link between the state and the government of India. Many people believed that he was actually a pro-Pakistani agent who received regular supplies of money from across the border and always exploited his position of being the religious head of the people of Kashmir to his personal advantage.

In spite of the conflicting images that he had in the public, he was always in the news and keen on keeping himself in the limelight. And he seemed to enjoy it all. He lived an affluent life, sent his children to reputable public schools, and had an

influential presence in the city. As a religious head, he could have played a meaningful role in changing the social and economic life of the people, but he did not do much in this direction. Most of the time he chose to work only for himself, consolidate his position, and aim at bigger things in life. So it was somewhat tragic that he should have died at this hour and in such terrible circumstances.

52

I knew many things about the Maulvi through a friend who had been his classmate in school for several years. The Maulvi's death reminded me of him, and I realized to my horror that I had neither seen nor heard from him for many weeks. So I made a concerted effort to get news about him through one of his brothers who had once been my office mate. I learnt that my friend was in Delhi because a close relative from his wife's side had died there in the Medical Institute. I felt worried about him because being away from the city for a long time could make him a suspect in the eyes of the militants and his return could become risky. When I spoke about it to his brother, he just laughed. This, he said, applied only to the Pandits and not to the Muslims.

Every time I am made conscious of this divide, I feel bad. Are we the only people in the Valley who are to be suspected? How is it that everybody else has risen above suspicion? Even the Sikhs, I am told, can now be relied upon, but not the Pandits. "It is not merely a question of whether or not the Muslims have faith in us, but a much more complex matter," Nathji said to me years ago. To prove his point, he told me

an interesting story which I had not believed then but find no reason to disbelieve now. Nathji died years ago, but his story has stirred back to life in me.

This story is connected with Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, who was the trusted deputy of Shiekh Abdullah, and who replaced him after his arrest in 1953. He displayed extraordinary courage in keeping the state peaceful after Shiekh's arrest had caused widespread unrest and violence in which many people had died. Slowly and steadily, he put the state back on rails and ushered in a new phase of developmental activities in the state. The central government gave him all possible support, including liberal financial assistance, which he used for building roads, schools, stadiums, and several huge buildings for creating new office space as well as residential quarters for government servants. He also promoted the idea of setting up new housing colonies by making available small plots of land at a low cost and giving loans for building houses on them to state government employees.

Along with the good things he did for the people of the state, Bakshi also did several other things which did not augur well for them and eventually became the cause of their mounting sense of dissatisfaction with the central government. Since he assumed power when there was strong public resentment against the arrest of the Shiekh and people showed reluctance to participate in any attempt at restoring normalcy in the political process, he acted tough by resorting to high-handed measures to break their resistance. These, no doubt, helped, but invariably violated democratic norms. The unfortunate feature of this policy was that instead of using

these measures as temporary expedients, to tide over a difficult phase, he converted them into a permanent part of what came to be identified as his style of governance.

Like the kings of old days, he cast himself in the mould of a benevolent despot, but also raised a private army of goons which was effectively led and organized by one of his several brothers whose job was to maintain peace in the Valley. The most noticeable part of their functioning was that they did not use any weapons to threaten people. Like in the old past, they made use of their muscle and, wherever it became necessary, a bit of extra-constitutional power. If the use of brawn did not yield the desired result, they took the help of the police who, as everyone knows very well in the Valley, are quite skilled in inducing a sense of discipline even among the toughest of people.

Bakshi's tactics led to the creation of new myths and new heroes. People were told in clear terms that it was in their interests to show respect for the government and to conform to the will of the state. For ensuring this, he instituted enforcement squads who always devised new and novel ways of punishing dissent under the direct control of senior police officers. Anybody found listening to Pakistan radio was converted into an ironing board. Those daring to raise their voice against the government were treated in two different ways, strictly in accordance with their merit, as Bakshi's advisors were never tired of saying. If such a person commanded popular support, he was won over to the side of the government politely and assiduously with lucrative offers; if he was just a noisy fellow, a windbag and a nuisance with no backing of any kind, he got a good licking. In short,

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Bakshi also gave people whatever they wanted as long as they did his bidding. This created new and unimaginable sources of corruption in the state, which it found difficult to shake off later. Corruption, in fact, became synonymous with efficiency because if a person got things done by spending more money than what was lawfully permitted, he was considered an efficient person. You could get anything done, provided you were willing to spend a bit of extra money. There are hundreds of stories of Bakhsi's trusted officers who charged money for anything and everything: for getting you a permit, a license, a quota, a job. The result was that merit became a liability. Some of the worst people got into high positions in the state simply because they had the right kind of political connection or the right kind of money.

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Bakshi also continued with one of the major policies that had firmly been established during the times of the Shiekh, which was to respect and feed Muslim majoritarianism. Being like a cow, the state had to be milked to the maximum to keep the Muslims comfortable and happy. This was the greatest disservice that the leaders of the state did to them; they were made to believe that they could get anything without really working for it. It is clear now that the beneficiaries of this policy were always the rich, the influential, and those who knew how to exploit their nuisance value to the maximum possible advantage.

When Bakshi asked his advisers to help him identify areas, departments, and organisations in which he could take credit for initiating measures for giving benefits to the Muslims for the first time, he was told that hardly any area had been left untouched. This vexed him to no end. He knew that he had to do something soon, especially because he was in a critical situation, to win people over to his side. So he instructed his advisors to examine carefully all the organisations and departments of the government for identifying the ones where the preferential treatment to the Muslims had not been exploited to the full.

Almost everybody suggested that his best bet was the department of education. It was a huge resource because the government had opened schools and colleges in the entire state to provide free education to all from the primary to the postgraduate stage.

When the Shiekh started this policy, he had wanted to keep the school and college education out of its frame for what he called tactical reasons. It was easy to put up with sloppy work

in the revenue department or in the department of public works, but not so in schools and colleges. There it could recoil on them in the long run, for poor quality of education would harm the interests of their children. Since the future of the community was at stake, he did not consider it proper to compromise on that. As a result of this, Pandits, who found it difficult to get jobs in other departments, got employed as teachers in schools and colleges with relative ease. After a short time, however, the Shiekh relented in this field too, but not to the same extent as in the other departments of the state. That is why the damage there was not so severe. I remember how the Pandits regarded getting the job of a teacher or a college lecturer as a decent and respectable start to one's career. The government, in fact, lent respectability to the job of college teachers by elevating them to the rank of gazetted officers of the state.

For Bakshi, the education department was the only hope. To give a start to his policy, he ordered heavy recruitment of lecturers in colleges. In his enthusiasm, however, he forgot to ensure that the mode of recruitment suited his designs. He let this task be handled by a high-level functionary in the department of education, a well-meaning scholarly person, who happened to be a non-Kashmiri.

When the officer completed his job to the best of his ability, he met Bakshi with the list of candidates he had selected for the job. A mere look at the list infuriated Bakshi, for it was based on qualifications and merit, and not on his wishes, about which the officer, unfortunately, had no clue. He cancelled the list and set up a properly constituted selection committee, which was instructed to follow the directions of

the government in their true spirit. The state, in this way, institutionalized a new unwritten policy of selecting people on the basis of their religious affiliation, even without inviting any special provisions of the constitution. In the course of time, it became a standard practice, which was adopted later in every sphere of the government. When other states of the country were trying to promote high standards of work and efficiency in all walks of life, our state was trying to evolve procedures to help the Muslims gain respectability and power. The state, in the true sense of the word, became a welfare state.

Teaching, especially in schools, was reduced to a farce. The state utilised the schools as safety valves, for all species of disgruntled people were given the jobs of teachers. Except for collecting their salary every month, they virtually did nothing. The falling standards of teaching in government-run schools became well known but did not cause any concern. New private teaching shops grew in large numbers to help students to do their job well. Giving private tuition became a new industry over which the Pandits managed to establish a powerful hold. Since scores of people got money without doing anything worthwhile, they did not mind spending a part of it on their children in these new centres of learning.

Admission to the professional colleges of the state was also regulated according to the new unstated but meticulously followed direction of ensuring that the Muslims, by virtue of being the most important section of the society, got their due share. Quite often it touched scandalous proportions, forcing students and their parents to go to the law courts to seek legal redress of their grievances.

Bakshi also earned fame for setting up new housing

50

Today Mohinder rushed in to tell me, in a very alarming tone, that I have become too visible and vulnerable. It surprised me because, except for yesterday, when I went out after weeks, I have rarely moved out of my house and hardly seen any people. An old friend, one of the earliest acquaintances I made in this new place, supplies me with milk and vegetables, which keep me going, and I am spared the need for moving out on the road to buy things on my own. I am pretty certain that many of my friends and acquaintances are not even aware of my being in the city. I told these things to Mohinder to convince him that his fear was baseless and unfounded. But he was in no mood to listen to me, for he had come with a made-up mind.

In a very sombre tone he said that the people who mattered knew that I was here. They had complete information about my movements; they even knew the number of times I had gone out of my home and the people I had talked with. This really was scary. He said the militants have an extensive network of spies, who do not look like spies. For the person who gives me my daily milk or the person with whom I talk in confidence could also be an informer. He may have nothing against me; he may not even wish me ill or see me come to harm, but this does not prevent him from undertaking the work of gathering information about me and my activities, which he considers a responsibility he owes to his people. In fact, this is how he combines business with duty. Thus, my milkman serves me, his customer of long standing as well as his community. It

raises him above suspicion and makes him an effective informer. This, I felt, was truly astounding!

Mohinder said that there were scores of people like my milkman, people who worked in government offices, private organisations, and even those who did the meanest of private jobs. I suddenly realised that maybe my colleagues and friends too have an obligation to meet: to inform the appropriate groups about my movements, even about my opinions on current politics. When I told Mohinder that I could hardly pose any threat to any person, he said nothing in response. He, however, said that keeping track of the Pandits and their movements was a policy adopted by the people in charge of affairs because they did not favour taking risks with anybody. Then he gave me an example that was really stunning.

In one locality of the city, there lived an old Pandit couple. Because their children lived outside the state, they decided to leave the city for good. But they wanted to leave only after selling their house, which, under the present circumstances, was almost impossible. The old man broached the subject to his retired Muslim friend and colleague who visited them almost everyday. He undertook to help them find a buyer. When he spoke to his wife about it, she suggested that they buy it for their daughter, to which he readily agreed.

Next day, he met the Pandits in their home, and conveyed his decision to buy it for his daughter, which made them happy. It so happened that while they were talking about it in the porch of their house, a woman who came to pluck grass and weeds from their garden for her cow was busy with her job. Since she was a daily visitor, they were not even conscious of her presence. The deal was finalised and they worked out the

mode of payment that would not attract attention. Both of them knew that it was risky to sell or buy Pandit property.

A day after this, the friend of the Pandits, a very respectable member of the community, was visited by a small group of Muslims. In one voice and with appropriate loudness, they criticised him severely for acting against the interests of the movement, and reminded him that in this hour of trial he was not to think of petty private interests, but the larger interest of the community. They made it clear to him that the house of his friend was already his because the Pandit would be forced to leave the place without selling it. So there was no need to acquire it through a bargain.

Next day, he told his Pandit friend to forget about selling the house and to prepare for his departure instead because he had already attracted the attention of the militants, which did not augur well for him. When they tried to figure out how anybody could have known about what they talked in their house, they remembered the woman in the garden.

After hearing this story, I saw the prison walls closing on me. The images of all the people I had met and talked with during the past two weeks flashed past me. I tried hard to remember if I had said anything against anybody or commented on any situation or incident which could be construed as an affront and invite retaliatory action, but nothing came to my mind. I told Mohinder that I had neither done nor spoken anything against the de facto power structures. He just laughed. The militants, he told me humorously, were under no obligation to investigate charges against me for getting rid of me. I could be liquidated even on grounds of suspicion. Before I could respond to this

frightful prospect, he spoke to me about what his aunt had overheard near the milk vendor's shop.

The milk vendor's shop was always crowded with people waiting for their turn because its owner Rahmana had built a reputation for selling unadulterated milk, a rarity in the city. As one of his esteemed customers, Mohinder's aunt received special treatment from him. He often requested other customers to make way for her to reduce her waiting time. That particular day, when she was near the shop, she overheard people talking about the diminishing number of Pandits in the locality. One person in the group observed that one Pandit was still there in the farthest corner of the locality. Mohinder's aunt understood that it was a reference to me. When somebody else intervened to say that he was a gentleman and incapable of harm, he was severely reprimanded by another one, who looked like the leader of the group. He said that in these times, every person, gentleman or no gentleman, was a potential enemy, and they needed to keep a watchful eye on him. This led to an animated discussion, in which they discussed the cases of several gentleman Pandits who, to use their colourful phraseology, had already been sent to their heavenly abode. As if to assure themselves, all of them agreed that the solitary Pandit posed no threat; he was a blank cheque that they could cash whenever they needed. Upon hearing this, Mohinder's aunt had rushed to his place to tell him what she had heard, and to urge me that the time for my departure had finally come.

For a moment, I felt the noose tightening around my neck. But the very next moment, I remembered my grandmother and her theory of malignant stars. I told Mohinder that if my

days were really numbered, then death would overtake me anywhere, here or at any other place. Here I would die by a bullet; in Jammu, I could die of heatstroke, like my uncle, or of snakebite, like the cousin of my friend. Mohinder glared at me in bewilderment. Had I succeeded in silencing him? For the time being, perhaps, I had. Fatalism has its uses, I realised.

Am I really in danger? Do I need to fear for my life? Should I take Mohinder's warning seriously? I remembered my doctor-friend. He promptly complied with the wishes of his tormentors. Like him, a number of Pandits and their families left their homes because their Muslim friends urged them to leave; they feared for their lives. When the Pandits left, the very same people criticized them openly for leaving their homes. What was this? Concern, expediency, or treachery?

It is difficult to find a satisfactory answer. But I do remember the day when one of my Muslim friends felt worried because I greeted him on the road. Later, when we were safe from public gaze, he requested me not to speak to him in the presence of other people. He also said that I should try to understand the gravity of the situation. Any link with a Pandit could spell danger for him and his family.

This new knowledge is too painful. Have we already become dreadful monsters whose touch can threaten lives, or untouchables who should be shunned? .

51

I was trying hard to come to grips with my situation and to understand why things should have come to such a pass when I heard a loud noise of commotion outside. I looked

out the window. Just near the main road, there were small groups of people in heated conversation, some talking feverishly and some gesticulating wildly. It was a clear indication that something serious had happened; either some important leader had been arrested, or some militant leader killed. I rushed to find out from the people out there, and got the dreadful news of Maulvi Farooq's death. Two or three people had walked into his home and killed him right there.

The Maulvi lived in a relatively peaceful part of the city far away from the usual trouble spots. Besides, his house was almost like a fortress, with a high wall around it and a sentry guarding its main entrance round the clock. The most puzzling thing about the deed was its timing; he was killed in broad daylight in the early hours of the morning. I asked the person who told me about his death for details about his killers; he said he did not know. I looked at him in disbelief, but in no time understood why he said so. Overwhelmed by the Maulvi's sudden death, he had no thought for his killers.

A little later, I was in for more surprises when I found that several versions about the Maulvi's death were already in circulation. The official one stated that a couple of youths entered his house, shot him at a point blank range, and managed to escape. One of the functionaries of his household, probably his gardener, who let them in or saw them get in, for there was some confusion on this among my informers, had been arrested.

The non-official version, which grew louder with every passing hour, was that the agents of the central government had killed him; some even pointed their fingers at the governor of the state. But to cover it up, they then made it known as

the doing of the militants, to tarnish their image among the public and to put brakes on their rising popularity.

It was difficult to make out what had actually happened. Since the crowds outside my home remained active the whole day long, I could learn more details about the possible reasons of his death, but the controversy about his killers remained unresolved.

Another version related Maulvi's death to his increasing involvement in the current political situation. According to it, the government of India had been trying, and had even succeeded in its efforts, to seek his help and support for getting over the current political impasse created by the on-going activities of the militants. Since he commanded the support of an influential section of the population of the city and had also a solid political background, the government wanted to use his presence to fill the vacuum caused by the virtual disappearance of the known politicians of the state from the scene. To accomplish this, the central government expected him to step out into the open, create possibilities for a dialogue with the people who sympathized with the militants, and thus restore peace and normalcy in the Valley. This move was propelled by the assumption that the common people were sick of what was happening and would, therefore, welcome the initiative. Many people believed that the Maulvi had shown his willingness to accept the offer; some went to the extent of saying that an agreement had already been reached with him, and the modalities were being worked out.

Had this plan succeeded, militancy could have suffered a serious setback. Sensing this, the militant leaders had been left with no option but to finish him off. But they knew that it

would be risky to do so because his death at their hands would invite public wrath and they could lose their influence with the people. This obviously was a difficult position for them, but they had to do something before it was too late.

The militants therefore devised a plan to finish him off, but to put the blame on somebody else's head. So, after doing away with him, they mounted a vigorous propaganda campaign condemning the incident in the strongest possible words, calling it a dastardly act, and blaming it all on the central government. They made the people understand and accept, by the sheer force of their loud rhetoric, that the central government was the villain of the piece because it resorted to all possible nefarious tactics to deflect the attention of the people by dividing them. In its desperation, it did not desist from committing even cold-blooded murders. As a friend of the suffering people, the Maulvi had virtually paid with his life for them.

Because the militants had already found their way into the heart of the public, and also because hundreds of people had died in crossfire and encounters with the security forces, this view was readily taken in by a large number of people. Some, of course, did argue, almost in an under-breath, that the central government had nothing to gain by getting the Maulvi killed, but that was too rational a view to find large-scale acceptance in such highly emotional times.

That the Maulvi was dead was a sad thing, for he was quite young and not particularly guilty of any serious wrongdoings. He was the religious head of a large section of the Muslims, and lived in a big mansion just outside the gate of the University of Kashmir, very near the place where its vice-

chancellor and his assistant had been kidnapped earlier. Right from the time he had assumed the religious leadership of the Muslims, the Maulvi had always shown a tendency to join politics to counter the influence of the government run by the National Conference. Traditionally, this party, led by the Shiekh, called the party of shers, was opposed to the party led by the Maulvi's father, the bakras. At one time, the Maulvi even joined hands with the Janata party of Morarji Desai, to fight the might of the Shiekh, and to pull him down from his pedestal. Though he succeeded in giving the party a visible presence by organizing huge processions in the city, he could make no appreciable dent in the complex political scene of the state.

The Maulvi's problem was compounded by the fact that he had no reliable image among the people. As a religious leader, he had a large following, but as a politician, he, like several other leaders of Kashmir, was very inconsistent in his views and actions. If at one time he made highly controversial and inflammable statements about the state's accession with India, at other times he not only did not hesitate, he even volunteered to become an important link between the state and the government of India. Many people believed that he was actually a pro-Pakistani agent who received regular supplies of money from across the border and always exploited his position of being the religious head of the people of Kashmir to his personal advantage.

In spite of the conflicting images that he had in the public, he was always in the news and keen on keeping himself in the limelight. And he seemed to enjoy it all. He lived an affluent life, sent his children to reputable public schools, and had an

influential presence in the city. As a religious head, he could have played a meaningful role in changing the social and economic life of the people, but he did not do much in this direction. Most of the time he chose to work only for himself, consolidate his position, and aim at bigger things in life. So it was somewhat tragic that he should have died at this hour and in such terrible circumstances.

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the government in their true spirit. The state, in this way, institutionalized a new unwritten policy of selecting people on the basis of their religious affiliation, even without inviting any special provisions of the constitution. In the course of time, it became a standard practice, which was adopted later in every sphere of the government. When other states of the country were trying to promote high standards of work and efficiency in all walks of life, our state was trying to evolve procedures to help the Muslims gain respectability and power. The state, in the true sense of the word, became a welfare state.

Teaching, especially in schools, was reduced to a farce. The state utilised the schools as safety valves, for all species of disgruntled people were given the jobs of teachers. Except for collecting their salary every month, they virtually did nothing. The failing standards of teaching in government-run schools became well known but did not cause any concern. New private teaching shops grew in large numbers to help students to do their job well. Giving private tuition became a new industry over which the Pandits managed to establish a powerful hold. Since scores of people got money without doing anything worthwhile, they did not mind spending a part of it on their children in these new centres of learning.

Admission to the professional colleges of the state was also regulated according to the new unstated but meticulously followed direction of ensuring that the Muslims, by virtue of being the most important section of the society, got their due share. Quite often it touched scandalous proportions, forcing students and their parents to go to the law courts to seek legal redress of their grievances.

Bakshi also earned fame for setting up new housing

colonies in the city. And this is where Nathji comes into the picture. Most of the plots in these newly established colonies were allotted to the Pandits. They sold off their ancestral houses in the downtown areas of the city and supplemented their resources by raising loans to build new ones. To most of them, it signified an opportunity for a better living, a change of style, but for a large majority, it was possible only through heavy personal sacrifice. Several people, I know, postponed their pet projects, even gave them up, to create a better living environment for their children.

The Muslims of the city were unhappy over this allotment. They considered it an open violation of the policy of respecting the aspirations of the Muslims, which everybody considered the main actuating force behind all government policies, irrespective of whoever was in power. The Muslims strongly believed that most of these plots should have gone to them and not to the Pandits. So they went in a delegation to Bakshi to express their anger and resentment against what he had done. One of the members of this delegation, Salam Dar, was a friend of Nathji.

At this time, Nathji was unhappy and perturbed because his only son had decided to look for a job outside the state; he felt that he had waited too long for getting it in his home state, and was so frustrated by his continuous rejections in selection committees, that he wanted to leave at once. When Nathji spoke about this to Salam Dar, he advised him to let his son do whatever he wished because he was doing the right thing. Without being too explicit, he said that Kashmir was not the right place for an intelligent person like him; his best future lay outside the state. Nathji had hoped that his friend

would dissuade his son from leaving home, but here he was doing the very opposite. So he felt let down, betrayed. Seeing Nathji's dejected face, Salam Dar said to him that he was virtually forcing him to tell him something that he was not supposed to divulge, that is, what transpired in the meeting with Bakshi Sahib. He wanted to ensure that Nathji did not misunderstand him and thus endanger his life-long friendship with him for agreeing with his son's wish to leave the state.

When the members of the Muslim delegation entered Bakshi's home, he told them to speak plainly without mincing words about their grievances. They squarely blamed him for being unfair in allotting plots in the new colonies, which were given at a subsidized price, to the Pandits, for these were in total disproportion to their numbers. As Bakshi did not say anything in response, they were emboldened to speak louder and in detail about the iniquity of the scheme. After hearing them, he told them that they were totally correct in what they said, but by overlooking the other side of the picture, they had failed to see why this had been done. To make them understand the true import of his move, he asked them to answer some questions related to the scheme which would clarify to them that the ultimate beneficiaries of the scheme would be the Muslims and not the Pandits, as it might appear on the surface.

Bakshi told them that to take advantage of the tempting offer of making new houses, the Pandits would sell off their old homes, most of these being in the interior of the old city, at rates that would be favourable to the buyers. Because almost all of the buyers would be Muslims, this would be their first gain. In fact, many people would get the opportunity of a

lifetime to buy houses of their own at an affordable price. The members fully agreed with him.

For building new houses, Pandits would have to invest heavily. This would generate new sources of income for Muslims because carpenters, masons, labourers, and suppliers of building materials were from their community. With a twinkle in his eye, he said that the Pandit would spend all his savings to fill their pockets; he would incur debts, sell his wife's jewellery and gold to build his dream house. Without the tempting offer of a plot of land at a relatively cheap price, the Pandits would take all their capital either to Jammu or to some place outside the state, a trend that had already become visible, causing huge losses of income to all of them.

After hearing this, the members of the delegation were tongue-tied; none of them had imagined that Bakshi would render them speechless. Some of them began to understand a little bit of economics too: how the increased flow of money into the market released by the spending of the Pandits would generate income for large sections of their society.

Things would not have reached the point where this incident becomes relevant to the story of Nathji if there had not been in that group a bright young man who responded to Bakshi's explanation somewhat differently. He conceded that a large-scale building programme would accelerate the economy by generating employment and expanding trade and commerce, but it would also make the Pandits a propertied class. They would become owners of brand new houses, which, after some years, would be worth ten times their present value. At the moment, no doubt, the Muslims,

especially the working classes, would gain from it, but the ultimate gainers would be the Pandits.

Thrilled by the young man's intelligence and sound commonsense, Bakshi congratulated him for being right, but made it clear to him that he had understood only what he saw on the surface. So he called him aside, gripped him by his nose, and told him in a patronising tone that he did not see beyond what was between his fingers. He knew economics but no politics.

In his characteristic style, Bakshi addressed the members of the delegation thus, "When all these houses, which are the cause of your present misery, are ready, more and more Pandits will be encouraged to make new and better houses. A time will come when entire colonies of new houses will be there to give a new look to the city. At an appropriate moment, you can easily get them, provided you play your cards wisely. I don't think that I need to tell you what is so obvious, that a house is not a sack of potatoes that a person can carry on one's back. When all the houses have been made, then you can raise your banner against the Pandits, drive them out of Kashmir, and take control of these ready-made houses. In this way, you get the first fruits of all the work that will go into their making, and later the very houses for your use. Thus, you will benefit from the making of the cake, then get the cake itself, and a lifetime to eat it at leisure."

The young man who prompted Bakshi to unfold the last part of his grand design might have taken it for a joke or a clever argument to keep him at bay, but Salam Dar did not. As a perceptive and knowledgeable person, he could visualize what it would be like in future. He felt happy that his friend's

son had decided to go out of the state on his own and not because of the import of the story that he narrated to his friend.

When I think about this story now, I am amazed by people's capacity to foresee the turn of events. Things have happened exactly in the manner in which Bakshi foresaw them. During the last twenty years, there has been massive building activities in the city and in almost all the major towns. Farmers converted their arable land, even their orchards, into small plots and sold them off to Pandits. They became millionaires and now, without spending a penny, they have full chances of occupying the houses left behind by the Pandits. In some localities they have already been occupied, with the active support of the officials of the government, on the pretext that their homes were gutted in encounters between the militants and the security forces.

Nathji died years ago without taking the story seriously. But this story will live forever, as a cautionary tale that went unheeded, because it was wrapped in secret covers. The huge patches of darkness in the city, especially in these new colonies, are the patches created by the houses of the Pandits who left them for the sake of saving their lives. But they built them exactly in the way in which Bakshi had visualized—by incurring debts, selling gold and jewellery—and are now lying untenanted and about to be taken over by the people who are out there. My doctor-friend has lost his house, but he is still paying monthly instalments on the loan he took from the government for constructing it. His wife is still without her gold bangles. My mother's brother waited too long for an auspicious hour to step into his newly made house, for

combining it with the happy occasion of his daughter's wedding. But that was not to be, for he is already in the sweltering heat of Jammu. Little did he know then that he was building it for the very person who was in his pay for safeguarding it.

53

During Bakshi's time, however, conditions in Kashmir were quite normal. Though he was an autocrat of sorts, he knew how to run the state to work towards making the people prosperous. By letting money flow freely into Kashmir, he helped initiate a period of boom, resulting in the growing prosperity of the people in the state. Tourists from all parts of the country thronged the beauty spots of the Valley, whose number was increased and their working improved at his bidding.

During this time I was in college studying for a Bachelor's degree in science. Going to college was the fond dream of every student in those days, especially because education was free. For a large majority of students, it meant passing intermediate exam, FA or FSc, which was considered the most difficult of all the examinations and then read for a BA or BSc degree. It was like following a well-charted road that was known to everybody. Our teachers were well educated and efficient, and commanded the respect of the students. The entire stretch of four years of my life in the college was one long patch of routine, except for some adventures of a very extraordinary kind, which may look ordinary to students of modern times.

During these times, I made friends with an enterprising young fellow called Roshan. He was an average student, but well versed in what people in those days called the ways of the world. Though he belonged to a lower middle class family, he was fond of spending money, which he always had plentifully, being the only son of his parents, on tea and snacks. He had a remarkable talent for inventing novel ways of solving problems, whether these related to extracting more than the required amount of money from his parents or getting into a movie theatre without dirtying his clothes.

Roshan liked watching films but was afraid of going to the movie theatre beyond college hours or on off days because his father considered it no less than a crime; in his view, films were the greatest source of moral corruption. He had never seen a film in his life, and he saw to it that Roshan did not spoil himself by watching them.

To escape his father's attention and anger, Roshan decided to indulge his fancy during college hours by staying away from classes. Since he did not want to do it alone and felt need of support, he seduced many of his classmates into joining him in these escapades. I distinctly remember watching three movies on three consecutive days with him; two mythological ones and one romantic one. When the teacher in the physics class asked me why I had been away for three days, I lied to him that I was caught up with the marriage of my cousin. Fortunately, my friends were not asked any questions, because they did not count in the eyes of the teacher. If they had been, my lie would not have looked convincing.

Roshan was interested not merely in watching films, he wanted to watch them on the very first day of their screening

in the theatre, so that he could impress his classmates and be admired for his resourcefulness. But watching films on the first day, which generally was a Friday, an off day for workers and artisans of the state, was not an easy job, because the crowds were the biggest on this day of the week. People lined up for admission tickets had to perform heroically to reach the booking window. After waiting for hours, the possibility of getting the admission ticket was very remote, for the queues lost their orderly shape soon after the first ticket was issued and disintegrated into a noisy, uncontrollable, violent crowd. In no time, all the hooligans would swoop on the window like flying monsters, perching themselves on people's heads and collecting as many tickets as they wanted and then selling them for profit to the very well-meaning and gentle beings whom they had forced to abandon the queues.

You could easily make out these black marketeers by their appearance. Invariably, they were big, burly fellows, with stubble on their faces, and they walked with an aggressive stride. Most often they were seen in the company of policemen, talking and laughing with them, as if they were their dearest friends. After securing their quota of tickets, they sold them right under the policemen's nose, often to the great annoyance of the victims. Much later, I came to know that they indeed were friends because of being partners in the business of earning an extra buck.

To counter this nefarious connection, which was a source of great disadvantage to Roshan and his supporters, he devised a novel strategy. He bought tickets on the last day of the screening of the previous movie, because that day the crowds were the thinnest and the black marketeers hardly visible. Then

he used them the day after that, when the new movie was released. For the lower classes, where people sat on benches and not in chairs, there were no seat numbers. This new strategy helped us to get into the cinema hall, ahead of everybody else, occupy the best seats, and look fresh and happy. Once inside, Roshan would look at himself and his companions with a sense of satisfying achievement. Securing a place on the very first day of the screening of a new movie was no easy job.

We had, however, to take certain precautions in our operation. We had to ensure that our tickets had the same colour as of the ones that were issued on that day, for the management often used tickets with different colours on different days.

Since Roshan was also a braggart who delighted in talking about his exploits, he passed on the secret of this technique to several other students who did not waste any time in putting it to use. The management of the cinema halls became extra cautious to discourage this by ensuring that such people did not find their way into the hall. On one particular occasion, we had just made it to the hall—together with three other people who had got their tickets from the booking window—when members of the checking squad of the theatre rushed in to catch the culprits. Fortunately, we escaped their net, because there were no counterfoils for the tickets of the lower class.

Another time, we found that there was a rigorous checking of tickets by matching their series numbers right at the entrance to the hall. On seeing this, we quietly withdrew from the line of entrants to wait for our chance. But the men at the

gate did not move from there; they seemed determined to catch the ones with previous day's tickets for appropriate punishment. Perforce, we had to abandon the programme of watching the film that day. But Roshan could not bear the idea of losing money that he had spent on buying the tickets. So he positioned himself in a secluded corner of the compound of the cinema hall and sold the tickets in the black market for five times their normal value. We left to have a sumptuous tea, but the persons who bought these tickets were caught and given a sound thrashing. That was the last of our adventures with films.

These days the cinema halls in the Valley are closed because the militants have decreed that they are injurious to the cause of freedom. For achieving something worthwhile, people have to work with whole-hearted devotion and avoid all pleasurable activities. Even the shops that rented video cassettes have been forced to close down. It is another matter, though, that it has created a new class of clandestine suppliers of cassettes who, in league with some junior leaders of the movement, supply them to clients at four times the normal rent. There has to be a price for everything.

54

Mohinder rushed in yesterday with panic news: that all the members of a family of Pandits who had bravely stayed back all these months had been gunned down, right inside their home. This happened in an area that falls between Habba Kadal and Fateh Kadal, the second and third bridges of the city. One of my classmates who lived in that area always

called himself the resident of 2/3 bridges. This family lived very near his place.

Mohinder said that this family had actually got stuck there because two of its old women, whose world was limited to the city of Srinagar, considered it unthinkable to leave their home and go to Jammu or any other place beyond that. So they hung on there, and along with them stayed their children, their wives and their grandchildren. It was a large and respectable family. Several Muslim leaders used their continued presence in the city to denounce the Pandits who had fled the Valley. Though the family's remaining in the city was because of purely private reasons, not many people knew about it. Because of this, their presence had a salutary effect on many other Pandit families of nearby localities; they felt encouraged to stay in spite of all the pressures that worked on them all the time. Perhaps that is why the militants considered them the right target for inducing fear in people.

Early in the morning, when the day had just begun, and the level of activity outside people's homes was low, the sound of gunshots pierced the calm of the locality. It was so loud and persistent that it reverberated for several days.

When the noise of gunshots subsided, people came out to see what had happened. They met a brutal sight. Men, women, and children lay in pools of blood all over the house. It seemed that a big group of militants had swooped on the place to ensure that all the inmates, numbering over a dozen, met their doom, and nobody remained alive even for a brief while to tell what had happened. Bodies were lying in all conceivable places: one on the front porch, two on the stairs, children in their beds, a woman just near the kitchen, and two old women

at the high corners of the big living room. The victims had virtually been pinned to their places, with no chance to escape their fate. That there were no survivors showed that the operation was carefully planned.

The killings were widely condemned by almost all the leading individuals and organizations of the city, like a ritual that has become quite common. This was followed by another bout of hushed silence. All the Pandits of the neighbouring areas have packed off and gone, gone beyond the Jawahar Tunnel, which separates the main valley from the rest of the state, in search of a safe retreat.

Such killings are part of a new strategy, specifically evolved to warn those Pandits who are still in the Valley. The militants clean places of residual Pandits by targeting one major household in that area, especially the one that may have inspired confidence in them. The immediate Muslim neighbours of these families sympathize with them; they even say sorry for their sad plight. But they also make them understand that it is not safe for them to continue there. So even when their neighours wish them well, they only precipitate their departure from their homes. For they are incapable of shielding them. This is what happened in Sunil's village. It was the same story in Premi's village. Now this is being repeated in different parts of the city and other villages of the Valley. It is the new low-cost method of ethnic cleansing, for it drives people away without wasting too many bullets.

55

I have seen so many people running away to Jammu for the sake of their dear lives. They little know (or perhaps they do) the kind of hell that awaits them there. For we have been getting reports of the rising tide of anti-Pandit feelings there. Although it is a part of the same state, and also of the same country, the Pandits are treated like under apartheid. Their children cannot be admitted to any school or college of Jammu because they are from Kashmir. The people of Jammu feel threatened. So new schools have been set up on a makeshift basis in tents and other rented buildings. What adds to the misery of the students is that the authorities have made it clear to them that in spite of being in Jammu, they will continue to be students of Kashmir University. That means following its academic and examination calendar, which, at the moment, does not even exist. The schools and colleges in Srinagar are still closed. The students at Jammu are still bound to their cursed fate in Kashmir.

Although the people of Jammu are happy to receive whatever rent they charge from the Pandits, they are constantly complaining about the hardships that have been inflicted on them. Instead of drawing the attention of the rest of the country to their plight and misery, journalists and newspaper reporters are busy inventing reasons for their present plight. There is this person from Calcutta who thinks that the Pandits are running away, leaving behind their homes and hearths and their life's capital, only to malign the Muslims in the eyes of the people of India. This is really ingenious. His logic suggests that a man will set his house on fire only to

make sure that the house of his neighbour is gutted. Another school of Communists and Marxists thinks that the suffering of the Pandits is the result of their exploitative ways in the past. Looks like we are relapsing into the patterns of justice of the medieval ages, when people were made to suffer for the sins of their forefathers. What is so callous about these explanations is that the suffering of the Pandits has to be traced back to them, as if they are not victims, but tormentors, paying for their sins or that of their forefathers.

The people of Jammu speak only ill of them, as if the Pandits are pests who have descended on their place only to trouble them. Some veteran journalists of Jammu, who have thrived on pleasing the Muslims of Kashmir, write only about their suffering and are totally impervious to the misery of the Pandits although it stares them in their eyes all the time. I find it difficult to believe that people can be so indifferent to pain and suffering. Only Ali Mohd spoke about the hard life of Pandits with compassion.

Why are the people of Jammu so callous? Why do they think that the place belongs only to them? After all, Jammu and Kashmir is one state and its people have a right to live wherever they like. Why should there be any discrimination on the basis of regions? I am reminded of my grandmother. Our malignant stars are growing in their size and influence, blighting the lives of almost all of us. No one, not even the state government, is fully aware of the problems of the Pandits. It is true that financial aid and subsistence ration is provided to the people who are not government servants after their arrival in Jammu, but that is not adequate even for their survival.

Nobody realizes the scourge that has befallen the Pandits, that they have become victims of a kind unheard in history: refugees in their own state and their own country. The government of India is not willing to recognize that the migration of these people deserves attention. A government that takes no time to issue announcements of help to people's problems in other parts of the world is tight-lipped about the problem of its own people. My friend tells me sarcastically that the government is waiting for the reaction of the U.S. Once they recognize that the misery of the Pandits deserves the attention of the world, then the government of India will break its unholy silence. It seems nobody is willing to speak for the weak and helpless. Nobody realizes that this will eventually have its fallout, for if we do not mend fences when they are about to collapse, we create room for greater calamities.

Perhaps my neighbour knows better. The government of India, in his view, does not speak about the plight of the Pandits because they are Hindus; a secular state cannot say anything about them. When I asked him why they do not fight shy of speaking about the Muslims, when they are in trouble, he said that that was a different matter. The secular state of India has obligation only to protect the minorities, who invariably happen to be Muslims. Our tragedy is that we are a minority in a state where the minority is in the majority, and, therefore, irredeemable!

56

Today is Vasu's birthday. This is the first time when Girija, Vasu, and Vinay are not with me to celebrate the occasion. And it is because our community has been subjected to a great

strain; its disruption is complete and total. Unfortunately, very few people understand this. Ours has been (alas! no more) a close-knit community of a kind that is not easy to find elsewhere. For all our kinsmen lived within the negotiable distance of four to five kilometers. Because of this, Vasu's birth was a big occasion. She was my grandfather's first great grandchild. Girija looked big and beautiful and quite stout even when she was in the last month of her pregnancy. It sounds almost unbelievable now that she went to work till the very last day. On the day of Vasu's birth, she was about to leave for her office when she complained of pain. The doctor confirmed it as the first symptom of labour. We rushed her to a nursing home. Within hours, the whole clan was there; my parents, Girijas's parents, and many more people from our joint-families, ready with offers of help.

Before Vasu's birth, Girija's room in the nursing home bore a festive look. People ran in and out of it, with packs of fruits, flasks of tea, and steaming samosas and pakoras, for a confectionery shop and a tea stall were just outside the nursing home. In no time, our relatives, neighbours, and friends, who had heard about her admission to the nursing home, came to see her. The presence of the ladies, in particular, reminded me how the huge girth of Girija had been a persistent subject of speculation among them. Would she have a son or a daughter? They scrutinized the contours of her swollen middle, her gait, her countenance, and her temperament, with an expert eye. The wise and more experienced among them said that her cheerful countenance, her pleasant behaviour, and her gait pointed to a boy, but her heaviness, for she really looked quite big, went against it; it clearly indicated a girl.

Did we too think on the same lines? Was it really important to know what it would be? Why not, cried my cousin, who is almost of my age. I remembered sadly how he wept uncontrollably when the first child his wife bore was a daughter. I was not unduly worried about the sex of the child. My only anxiety was that it should be a living whole.

I looked at Girija in the hour of her trial, but could not know what went on in her mind at that time. I could only feel her physical discomfort, which was quite visible. After several intermittent bouts of pain, she finally got a big one which made her roll in agony. The doctors rushed her to the operation theatre, where our daughter, a small and shrivelled being, made her entry into the world late in the evening of a warm day.

Although I had handled my younger brothers and sisters with ease and assurance, I was not too sure of how to hold her, for she was tinier than anything I had ever seen. When I finally succeeded in taking her in my arms, the experience was electrifying. I gently raised her up to my chest to have a close look at her face; as if she was expecting this, she opened her eyes slowly. Then she also smiled sweetly. I felt quite excited though I knew that she could not have recognised me. I remembered my mother's oft-quoted words that newborn children smile only when they are reminded of something from the world they have come from and not because they see new things in the world they have come into, not even their parents.

Little Vasu grew up so fast that everybody was amazed. In her eighth month, she was a bouncy child who walked and talked with ease and unbelievable confidence. I don't know

where she is now and in what condition! Happy birthday, dear Vasu!

57

Vasu was about two months old when my grandfather bowed out of this world gracefully. He had always been a strong and energetic person. Even after retiring from active service, he kept himself busy throughout the day, and went for long walks in the evening. He was an early riser and spent three to four hours daily in the puja room.

One day, he just felt weak and took to bed. When my uncle and father returned from their offices and found him lying on his bed, they were alarmed. They read it as a sure sign of his imminent end, which, unfortunately, proved true. Within three days, his overall condition deteriorated beyond belief. The family doctor astounded all of us by his diagnosis: that he was suffering from numerous afflictions and would not survive for long.

My grandfather was past his eighty-fifth year, but we could never imagine him ill or dying. He had seen Vasu for just about a month and a half. That I thought was too little time to know one's great-grandchild. But Grandfather looked at life and the worldly things somewhat differently. During the little time he got to see her, he fondled her, played with her, found her charming and lovely, expressed his happiness over her birth, but her tiny frame also forced his mysterious smiles. Did they suggest that he was not destined to see her for long?

It took me a while to understand that Grandfather was fully prepared to leave this world. When I went to see him

on the third or fourth day of his sickness, I could sense that he was about to fade away. This awareness hit me so hard that I lost control and burst into tears. But Grandfather just smiled. He took my face in his hands, kissed me on my cheeks, and requested my father, who was sitting close by, to explain to me why I was not to cry at that hour. In spite of his affection for all the members of our large family, particularly his grandchildren, Grandfather was a detached person, a true yogi. From his sick bed, he constantly gazed at the portrait of his guru.

Just a day after this, when he was still strong enough to sit up, Grandfather asked for a kangri and called all of us to his room. He lit a small fire in it, and burnt small pieces of paper. When each piece flared into a flame for a second or two, he recited something in his weak voice, which was not fully audible to us. This lasted a few minutes. Then he bowed to it and folded his hands in a namaskar. All of us watched this with curiosity, but also with solemnity, for we knew that he would not do anything too ordinary in those final moments of his life. Then he asked for some kahva and became his normal self.

After everybody else had left I ventured to ask him the meaning of what he had done. He said that he wanted to assure the gods that he was willing and prepared to leave this world. The ritual he had performed was a symbolic burning of his body, of his giving himself up to agni. Now it was for the gods to decide when they would call him up there. He did it for his speedy deliverance from this world, the world he had loved so much. This was almost like a revelation to me. The gods, it seemed, were really waiting for a signal from him, for by

evening he lapsed into a state of deep coma, and the day after that he gave up his mortal frame.

Before getting Grandfather ready for his final journey, my father told me to open his big box, which always remained under his bed. When I removed its lid, I found that it was packed with all the things that our custom required for cremating a dead person, right from the time of his ritual bath to the time of lighting the pyre: hand-stitched clothes for his final wear, a printed cotton sheet for covering his body, a large-sized shawl that is customarily spread over the body of the departing person, another shawl, generally put on the bodies of people who die old, even small coins, for showering on the bier, and wads of currency notes for performing the rituals that had to follow the cremation.

I was amazed by this meticulous preparation for one's death. Grandfather was truly a class by himself. I just wonder what dreams, imaginings, he had of his life after death. And what went on in his mind while collecting all the required things for his final journey from this world. Did he shed a tear when he tried his 'dying' outfit on his living frame? I am sure, he didn't.

58

Today I read some early parts of my growing corpus of entries with the spirit of a detached reader. Did I see the pain only of my community? Was I even aware of the pain and suffering of the Muslim community? How truthful was the accusation leveled against me by one of my Muslim friends:

that I did not feel the pain of people other than my own. Have I really become so self-centered?

I said to my friend that the Muslims too had suffered. Militants killed scores of them after branding them mukhbirs. Many more died in incidents of crossfire between the militants and security forces and in the combing up operations of the police. But the suffering of the two communities cannot be equated. First, because the Muslims created the conditions that resulted in disturbances in which people have died. I did not go into the reasons, for these lay in the realm of controversy.

Second, although many among the Muslims have died and are still dying, a large number of them view these deaths differently from those of the Pandits. They think they are fighting for a cause for which they are willing to die. Their death is not wasteful, for it will help shape anew the lives of the ones who will survive the present conflict and also of the generations to come. Because of this, their sacrifices are publicly acknowledged and considered a source of inspiration for others. It is a different matter that a large percentage of the people who have died are from poor families. Rich and upper class Muslims who have properties and businesses outside the Valley have shifted their families to safer havens. They, of course, maintain a nominal presence in the Valley and regularly provide money for the movement.

It is also known that many Muslims have serious doubts and reservations about what is happening in the Valley. Several among them have migrated along with the Pandits to Jammu and other places because their thinking is considered inimical to the success of the movement. Its leaders are not tired of

repeating in all conceivable forums that it demands unqualified obedience from people, and its goals and methods admit of no argument or debate. The dissenters who are still in the Valley do occasionally raise troublesome questions, but not loud enough to attract punitive action. Are we really fighting for something that is desirable and achievable? Isn't the movement actually a power struggle between different political interests in which the innocent people are being used as pawns?

The varying shades of Muslim perception of the movement lend a complex edge to Muslim suffering, making it difficult for anyone to define it in clear terms. However, no one can deny that pain and sorrow are a part of it. A father's heart bleeds silently; a mother's wail pierces the heart; and the general lamentation too is quite loud. But before these expressions of pain and loss sink in to result in depressing feelings and generate a mood of futility and cynicism, the leaders among the community step in to wrap sorrow in a coveted cloak of honour. The father's bleeding heart is covered with a frame of pride, and the mother's wail is directed into a new slogan of martyrdom. This is how the Muslim suffering is being rationalized and valorized. I am not sure though how long it can go like this. Perhaps, for a long time.

Death, sorrow, and heroism have already got interwoven into a vicious cycle which may be difficult to break. Everything is happening so fast that people do not get time even to think. What they are learning, which is quite disturbing, is that these losses have to be borne in their stride. No sooner has the blood dried where it fell than people start moving about and resuming their normal activities.

There are other voices, too. This is what we have made of ourselves, and this is what it will be for many more days, an old passerby laments. We have sullied the fair name of this place, says an old woman, and converted it into a place of sin. Allah will make us pay for them right here, in this very life. Looks like we are on the fringes of the Day of Judgment!

59

Sitting at home and avoiding the possibility of going out for fear of risking my life—is this what my life has got reduced to? Why this self-imposed detention, and for how long? Am I really afraid of dying? What do I live for? I sent Girija and the children away because I did not want them to get trapped in the unpleasant and oppressive climate of the present. Why did I not go along with them? These thoughts plague my mind, and add to my anxieties.

Does anybody have the power and the will to resist the forces of disruption and hate that are at work in the Valley? Till now, I have not heard of any individual or organization that has expressed or demonstrated any opposition to the programmes and actions of the militants. Far from it, more and more people are getting converted to their views and their methods for realizing what some of them are not even sure of.

What about me? I know I cannot protest, even if I wanted to, because I am a loner. Doing so will invite punishment and death. If I have already lapsed into a hopeless situation in which I can neither live the way I want to, nor fight what goes against it, then what is the purpose of my being alive? Is it a meaningless perpetuation of breaths that have no power to

renovate or energize? These thoughts are depressing; they invade me all the time and destroy my peace and sanity.

But as I write these words, I feel strong because I realize that my being here is in itself an act of defiance. Though it may not seem heroic, it is as significant as the action of a person who is out with a gun in his hand. My sheer presence is a challenge to the might of the militants, because it demonstrates my refusal to pay obeisance to their wishes.

My writing too is another forceful mode of protest. By letting my thoughts flow freely, I assert my right to speak the way I want to. Someday, when the winds of change will blow away the oppressive climate of hate and distrust, these words will be understood in their true spirit and recognized as my protest against a situation in which I had no other weapon to fight the enemy.

When people are in prison, they are saved from cracking up by resisting the present with their pen. Their writing keeps them going and hoping for better times.

I must continue being here, and write what I feel and like. Writing is my life, my being.

60

Have I survived till now merely because of my good luck? Or because I still enjoy the respect and goodwill of the people in the city, at least of the ones who know me? The unexpected visit of two old Muslim students of mine yesterday turned into an unforgettable experience; they made me believe that I still have well-wishers here, who have no problems with my presence.

It was daylight when they knocked at my door at around 5 p.m. The timing was helpful because before letting them in I got to see them from the side-window. The sight was pleasantly surprising: a well-dressed young man and a woman looking expectantly at the closed door. Although I could not place them, I could easily make out that they were decent people, and did not look dangerous at all. Unhesitatingly, I opened the door.

Once inside, they addressed me as Masterji, an appellation that I had almost forgotten because I was no longer in the business of teaching. They obviously knew me well, but I could not recognize them. Perhaps because of the puzzled look on my face, they put me at ease by asking me how things were with me, and how I kept myself occupied within the solitary confines of my home. Then they made polite inquiries about Girija and the children. The tone of their talk and the expression on their faces clearly indicated that they felt concerned about me.

Although I talked with them with all the amiability I could muster, I was acutely conscious of my awkwardness because, in spite of straining my memory, I was not able to recall their association with me. So I made a desperate move. I walked up to them to have a closer look at their faces. For a moment I felt that it was being brash, but, fortunately, I did not need to scrutinize their faces for long. Almost in a flash, I remembered both of them. Though a married couple now, I knew them as young students whom I had taught privately at home.

They reminded me of the times when I worked in a private school where salaries were so low that I had to supplement

my income by giving private tuition. These schools had been started by influential and wealthy people to make money by taking advantage of the rapidly falling standards in government-run schools. They provided quality education to the students by hiring well qualified young men and women, who were plentifully available. Precisely because of this, they exploited the teachers by making them work for eight hours a day for a measly sum. Within a year of joining one such school, I built a solid reputation as a competent teacher, taught people at my home, or in their homes, and established close links with several rich and influential Muslim families. My swelling clientele enabled me to give up my school job, and I became a full-time tutor.

After recognizing my students, I hugged them, and also congratulated them on their marriage. I talked with them about my family, the things Girija and our children had to put up with in my absence during winter months, and the circumstances in which I was forced to send them to Delhi; but I made it clear to them that they would be back as soon as there was improvement in the conditions in the city because we had no plan of leaving the place for good. At this point I almost quivered with emotion, my voice became heavy, and I could barely control my tears. Seeing that I was possibly on the verge of breaking down, they walked up to me, gently held my hands, and sat by my side.

Without asking any questions or seeking any clarifications, they sought my permission to state what they had on their minds, which I readily granted. They said that it was not all right for me to live alone in the secluded corner of my locality from where all the other Pandits had fled, and that it would

be better that I shifted to their place, at least till Girija and the children returned to be with me. Being with them would put me in a healthier and more congenial atmosphere, put some cheer in my daily routine, and save me from the bothersome activity of domestic chores that I had been forced to do on my own.

I had never imagined that I would get such an invitation. It almost bowled me over, though in a pleasant way, so much so that I could not decide how to respond to it. I must have remained quiet for a minute or two, maybe even stared at them in confused amazement, until they renewed their request that I leave along with them for their home. Upon hearing this, I overcame my confusion, thanked them for their kindness and consideration, and also for remembering their old teacher. I spoke out of gratitude, but they misunderstood "remembering their old teacher" as an ironic twist and therefore a kind of veiled complaint for not coming to see me earlier. They became unduly apologetic and did a bit of explaining about visiting me now. They had learnt about my presence in the city in some gathering only two days back.

I thanked them profusely for their kind visit and did my best to convince them that I did not doubt their sincerity, but could not accept their tempting invitation. And I said, "I would have accepted it gladly at any other time, but cannot accept it at this time. I have to face up to the situation in my own home, for it is a test of my faith and trust." I had wanted to speak in a firm tone of conviction, but my voice let me down. I spoke with such undue vehemence that they did not press their point. They wished me well and requested me to call them whenever I needed help of any kind. And then they

left. I continued to look at them until they were out of my sight.

Their visit filled me with hope, but I am not sure if it is potent enough to help me survive. Can a handful of well-wishers guarantee my safety in this atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust? I could probably have been safe in their home, but would that ensure my safety on the road? Can I get out of my mind the images of vengeful hostility that I have seen grow around me?

And yet I continue to be here. Sometimes, I am piqued by the inexplicable bafflement of my own mind!

61

Of late, I have learnt about another disturbing aspect of people's lives. Their veneer of heroic talk hides an unpleasant reality; they have been gripped by fear in a big way. The stories of the terrorist groups fighting among themselves are in the air. Members of a group fall foul of each other to create independent ones with new names and new banners. Like the story of the old giant whose every drop of blood, when it touched the ground, gave birth to another one like him. The number of giants is proliferating at a fearsome speed. In the midst of so many groups, so many factions, so many ideologies, where does one pin one's faith and trust? This troubles everybody, and this they lament every day.

I asked my Muslim neighbour what was a movement worth if it had already split into many groups and, instead of providing for openness, insisted on exacting obedience from people by smiting their souls with fear. He made no answer,

just hung his head. When I pestered him to say something, he admitted, speaking in a low and sad tone, that there no longer was a single, unified movement; there were several parallel movements, with differing goals and means for realizing them. They were also involved in a fierce and bloody struggle for power.

My friend also said that several smaller parasite groups had spawned around the major groups. I liked the manner in which he explained it to me. For watching a movie, he said, people would normally buy tickets from the booking windows, but if there was a big rush for tickets, and they did not want to risk losing their shirts or heads, they bought them in the black-market, which was open and accessible. In the same manner, there are militant groups that are genuine and militant groups that are spurious. The latter consist of people who use the tactics of the militants for their personal gain, ranging from getting a sumptuous dinner to seizing a wad of currency notes or having a fling with a woman. Although liquor shops are closed because of militant orders, every type of liquor is made available to them by whosoever wants to keep them in good humour.

Terrorism has already turned into a new adventure, and also a new market to tap. With resources shrinking, especially for small traders, and the arms of the big groups becoming longer for money and support, many people have found in terrorism a new business, which can be started without much investment. All that one needs is a gun and a fearsome voice. Now the infection has spread and contaminated even the genuine groups, especially their young members, who know that death can overtake them any moment. They feel that the society owes them a steady supply of good food to keep their

bodies strong and fit, a cupful of liquor to keep their spirits high, and pleasurable moments with women, for they may not see another day. Instant marriages, performed hastily at the point of a gun, have become so common that parents with young daughters in their homes have pouches of anxiety below their eyes.

Stories of extortion, seizures, and forcible marriages are circulating with alarming recurrence. The sad thing is that no one is now surprised or shocked by these things. They say that the situation in Punjab has proved beyond any doubt that militancy cannot sustain its idealistic orientation for too long. The terrorists have already turned into new looters. If politicians in the past amassed money to live a life of ease and pleasure, why shouldn't they? So we have different kinds of terrorists with different kinds of motives, and one does not know whom to trust.

But why this fear in people, I asked my friend? He said people are so confused by the bewildering variety of militant philosophies that they are not sure of where to pitch their tent. They are afraid that while dealing with them, they might be caught on the wrong foot. Because of this, every individual in a family has become an island. Children are afraid of talking to their parents, and parents are afraid of opening their mouths in the presence of their children. The mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law are pitted against each other not because of their age-old rivalry but because of their new ideological affiliations. Only last week a young boy shot his own mother because she talked like a mother and not like an ideologue. It seems that we have almost reached the end of the road. Ahead lies only a dark tunnel with no light in sight.

When I looked at my friend, he was in throes of despair. It did not seem the right time to ask him why the militants were dead set against my community, and why they were bent upon hounding its members out of the Valley, but I still ventured to ask. He said that, in spite of their differences, all the groups were agreed that their fight was against the Indian State, and the Pandits were its symbol in the Valley. "Yours is a gone case," he said to me humorously. "If you are still here and alive, it is because of your good luck." When I drew his attention to many more people like me who were scattered all over the city, he smiled mischievously and said that all of them were not like me—alone, aloof, and away from real action. The ones in the heart of the city invariably provide safe shelter for the weary limbs of the militants and a touch of pleasure too. Like the inns of yore, their houses have turned into modern-day pleasure haunts, and that is the secret of their survival.

62

Today Mohinder came with the news of yet another threat to my life. He sounds worried because I treat all his serious information somewhat slightingly.

This time he looked grave, perhaps to make sure that I listened to his words with proper attention and respect. He had learnt reliably that I was now on top of the list of the people the militants wanted to liquidate, and that I was like the corpse on furlough, using an expressive image from a play he often quotes. When I reacted by laughing loudly, he felt irritated and said that I behaved like the stupid Dwarkanath. I could understand his phrase from a play, but the reference

to Dwarkanath was quite unexpected, for I knew no person with that name, and therefore was not sure of what I had done to be in his company. So when I asked Mohinder about this, he narrated to me the story of another killing.

Dwarkanath was the only son of his mother, and she was dead set against going to Jammu. Naturally, he too stayed with her. They lived in a part of the old city where neighbourhoods, unlike what they are in the new housing colonies that have come up during the last two decades, mean much more than a physical proximity of houses. People there share a deep and tried-out relationship, reflected in their participation in each other's joys and sorrows. Dwarkanath's mother knew all the families in the locality and was convinced that she was safe in that predominantly Muslim area. It could also be that she had been encouraged by her neighbours to stay on there. But neither she nor Dwarkanath was aware of the danger that his association with the police department of the state posed to him.

Everybody knew that the local police in general were sympathetic to the cause of the militants and did not ordinarily interfere with their activities, but because of being a Pandit, Dwarkanath was already a suspect in the eyes of many people. It was an unfortunate coincidence that somebody remembered that he worked in the police department, which was enough to put him in the dock. Thousands of police personnel in the department could be trusted because they were Muslims, but not him. Poor Dwarkanath did not even suspect that he was all the time being discussed by the local surveillance committee of the militants and their sympathizers, which was meant to keep on eye on the people who posed a possible threat to their

cause. He shared the simple faith of his mother, and he lived on in his home without feeling any anxiety or any kind of fear.

When some well-wishers threw veiled hints at him that he could be suspected of being a mukhbir, he just laughed it off, treating it as a joke, for he knew that he was no big police official, neither an SP nor a DIG. If the likes of them, who were involved in planning and executing raids against the militants, had no fear for their lives, there was no reason why a small fry like him should feel worried. That, in fact, sounded sensible. Besides, though he worked in the police department, he was not even a proper policeman, and did not wear a uniform. He was only a clerk in the office, whose job was to maintain the files of policemen. But Dwarkanath continued to figure in the heated discussions of the members of the committee, mostly because there was nobody else they could discuss—a severe paucity of doubtful cases. His mother's belief that they were safe there because they had hardly a noticeable presence proved their undoing.

The committee had not only to show to the others that it was busy and working, but also to provide concrete evidence of this. When its members found that there was no one else they could get hold of, they decided that it would have to be Dwarkanath. He had many Muslim friends who admired his roaring sense of humour, but they could not help him. The one who tried did not succeed because Dwarkananth dismissed his warning as baseless fear.

When the irritated members of the committee met in a stormy session at Ahmed Khan's place to discuss Dwarkanath, one of them felt that the most appropriate way to end the discussion was to decide that he be finished off. For did not

the wise people say, "If you have a recurring toothache, better get rid of the tooth." When Dwarkanath's lease of life was terminated on paper, Ahmed Khan's son, Jamal, who was one of his ardent admirers, rushed to his place to tell him that his death warrant had been signed. He had thought that Dwarkanath would panic and flee the place, which he really wanted him to do, because he did not like the idea of seeing him dead, but, as always, Dwarkanath treated it as a joke and laughed hilariously. He patted Jamal on his back for his good work and advised him to attend to his own business. And Jamal could do nothing but gnash his teeth in anger.

Within hours, the firing squad was in Dwarkanath's compound. A chorus of voices called him to show himself. He promptly obeyed, and that was the end of him, for no words were exchanged, and no threats and accusations traded. There was only a round of effective fire, which put an end to the travails of the committee members. When Dwarkanath's mother saw her son face the fire, in utter confusion, she could not even cry; she just froze in terror, the moment got permanently etched in her memory. Shamrani, for that was the name of his mother, is still there in her desolate home, a captive of the moment that darkened her life forever.

63

Militancy is breeding new stories—stories of pain, suffering, and betrayals. Lives are getting disrupted beyond repair. Pandits continue to flee. Muslims too have started experiencing the adverse impact of militancy. Yesterday Nazir rushed in to tell me the story of Samad Bhat's daughter,

one of the several stories he knows about the Muslims. He was keen on sharing it with me because it ended without any unpleasantness, though it caused anxious moments to the people involved.

The city has already become an ocean of stories, he said, but there aren't many tellers. Not for want of talent, but because most of them are stories of pain, suffering, and gloom. When I lamented that they would die and be forgotten, Nazir understood my concern. But he felt that it was better that they be forgotten, for they do not deserve to live. "There is no point in wearing one's shame on one's sleeve," he said gravely. Nazir thinks that only pleasant and happy-ending stories deserve to survive, and that is why, of all the stories he knows, he tells me the story of Samad Bhat's daughter.

Samad Bhat is one of the known successful businessmen of the city; he has shops in Srinagar and several other cities of the country. Because of his business commitments, which he prefers to handle by himself, he has often to be away from Srinagar.

In his absence, his mother, a wise and kind woman, looked after the family, which included his wife and their children. The eldest was a daughter, Saleema, a bright student who had just joined the Govt. Medical College as a first-year student. The family had also a trusted servant in Salama, a good-looking lad of about eighteen, who had been with them for over ten years.

Salama came from a remote village of poor parents and had very little education, but he was well versed in housekeeping, and also an excellent cook. It so happened that militancy captured his attention beyond anyone's belief. He

felt it like a breath of fresh air in his prosaic routine and started taking keen interest in the activities of the militants. Stories of their "brave deeds," such as looting banks, killing people, and hurling grenades at police pickets fired his imagination. He spent a great deal of his time outside the house, returned with stories of the exploits of the militants, and narrated them to the family members in an excited voice.

Being a wise and experienced woman, Samad Bhat's mother noticed the change in Salama's behaviour and spoke about it to her daughter-in-law in anxious tones. Before they could decide what to do about it, Salama left their home one morning and was not seen after that. When he did not show up for several days, they sent word to his parents that he had left without leaving any message or address, but Salama's parents seemed least worried by his sudden disappearance.

After several weeks, however, much to the surprise of the two women, Salama reappeared vastly transformed in his dress and his demeanour to tell them that he was back in the city and had a new job. When asked about where he had been and what his new job was like, he was very evasive, but he promised to tell them everything after some time. And then he left.

Both women were quick to notice changes in his person and behaviour. For the first time in all the years that he had been in their house, he sat face to face with them in a chair, showing no signs of embarrassment or uneasiness. In fact, he looked supremely self-confident.

After about two weeks, Salama visited them again along with two friends, tough-looking hardy youths who did not look too sure of themselves. Since Samad Bhat was busy with

some work in his room, the two women came out to receive them. After the exchange of usual pleasantries, Salama made pointed inquiries about Saleema's health and her work and said how bored she must be feeling because her college was still closed. Then somewhat abruptly he made bold to tell them that as a new recruit in the army of the Mujahids, he considered himself a worthy suitor for their Saleema, and requested them for her hand.

Although he knew the wide social gap between his and Saleema's family and that he was literally uneducated, Salama spoke without hesitation or embarrassment. It convinced the two women that he meant every word of what he had said. This was like a bombshell, totally unexpected and unimaginable. Without showing any signs of anger or nerve or discomfort, they heard him quietly and maintained a calm exterior. They felt instinctively that a false move by them could threaten the life of their daughter.

Samad Bhat's mother congratulated him for getting a new job, praised him for his courage and determination, and told him that while he was eminently qualified to ask for their daughter's hand, such things needed to be done with proper ceremony, and not in an unseemly hurry. Salama was completely taken in by the cordiality of his mistress and agreed to her suggestion to come after three days, when all arrangements would be made for the festive occasion.

When Salama left along with his companions, the two women gave out such a loud wail that Samad Bhat rushed out of his room in panic to see what calamity had overtaken the family. The children too ran out in total confusion, for the painful cry of the women was quite unnerving. The two

women cried loudly into Samad Bhat's bosom, flailed their arms, beat his chest, and complained that Allah had singled them out for the tragedy that had overtaken them.

Samad Bhat kept his cool, consoled them by saying that he was not dead yet, and that he would do something to avert the impending disaster. He needed to assure them again and again that he would find a way out, for God had already shown his mercy towards them. He was thankful to Him that he was right there, in their midst, in this hour of trial. He also thanked his mother for not calling him out when Salama was there, for he would certainly have flared up, and that could have led to complications. His mind was also working fast to think of a way out. In a flash he remembered his Pandit friends, and a smile lit his face.

Early in the morning, when even the cock had not opened his eyes to announce the dawn, and the city was still under the languorous influence of the lazy moon, he put all the members of his family in his car, and drove out of the city towards Jammu.

Nazir conceded that Saleema was lucky, but scores of young women did not have such luck. I wanted to know more about those unfortunate beings, but he was not forthcoming. The less said the better was his cryptic response.

64

When Ranjit heard this story, he too agreed that it was a happy exception because such stories did not generally end happily. This is what happened in the case of Sheila. In a faraway town, which is about forty miles south of Srinagar,

she is known as Sheila the loony, Sheila the lunatic. Though barely eighteen or twenty, she looks old, moves about in rags, muttering something all the time. The urchins of the place often chase her with stones in their hands. She generally ignores them, but, sometimes, when she growls back in anger, they do not hesitate to hit her. Then she looks bruised and battered.

Sheila was not always like that. Only a few months back, she was the eldest child of Pandit Jagarnath, one of the respectable people of the town. Since he was the only son of a wealthy landowner, he had spent a wasteful childhood and youth; he received no education, acquired no skill, and lived off the fat of the land that his father had bequeathed to him. He had no job, no regular source of income, and not enough savings, but he managed to live a comfortable life from whatever he got from his land, and, therefore, had no complaints against life. But now he was in trouble.

When he saw his brethren fleeing the town because of the growing feeling of fear, he did not know what to do with himself and his family. Where would he go? What would he do? He was just good for nothing. So he let things drift! But he looked worried when he discovered that he was the only one of the community left behind. His children lost their playmates and their freedom to move about. They were virtually forced to keep inside most of the time. He alone moved out to buy things for their daily consumption.

Many of Jagarnath's Muslim companions, with whom he had spent good times, sympathised with him because they knew of his desperate situation, that he was entirely dependent on what he got from his land. But just because of this, several

others who could have profited from his absence resented his presence. Unmindful of this, possibly because he could not help it, Jagarnath stayed on.

One day, he was surprised by the unexpected visit of a couple of young men to his home. He was in for more surprise when they spoke to him respectfully that he was safe in his place, and even assured him that nobody would harm him or his interests. For Jagarnath it was something truly unbelievable. So he thought of capitalizing on this by cementing his friendship with them. He encouraged them to visit his home and treated them to sumptuous meals. His children too broke their reserve and started mixing with them. That was when the leader of the group spotted Sheila, the budding beauty in the family.

Jagarnath was happy and contended in his newly-found safety. He even started believing that he was lucky because by staying on he had been spared the travails his neighbours and relatives had been subjected to in Jammu. In his easeful contentment, he did not pay enough attention to the growing friendship between Sheila and the leader of the group and its possible consequences. Every time the leader came there, he encouraged her to speak with him. Sometimes he came alone to make sure that she did not feel any hesitation in responding to his overtures.

After some time, there was a sudden change in the political climate of the town, when it was threatened by a new wave of insurgents. Most of them were mercenaries and volunteers from other countries. The result of their formidable presence was that the local militant group came under severe pressure. This was particularly bad for Jagaranth. By now everybody knew that he

was there because he enjoyed the support of the local group.

The new group of terrorists made inquiries on their own and questioned the wisdom of letting this particular family stay on in the town. Several other people who were unhappy with Jagarnath's continuance in the town joined this group to create conditions that would force him to leave. When the local group learnt of their plan, they prepared Jagarnath to be ready for leaving his home. There was a danger that the new group might kidnap him or even attack his house. Jagarnath got frightened, but he could do nothing except to rely on his friends. Visualizing his imminent plight, he sought and waited for their advice and help.

One evening, when darkness had just set in, an empty truck stopped outside the main door of his compound. Three young men got down, entered the house, and put into it everything that was inside Jagarnath's home. The time for his departure had arrived. Then his mother, his wife, and younger children were made to sit just behind the driver's seat. When Jagarnath tried to help Sheila into the front seat, the leader stopped him and said that she would not go with him. This was too shocking to hear from a friend, and he refused to get in without her. But they forced him in, and threatened to blow up the truck, with everything in it, if he did not comply with their orders. The driver got panicky and urged Jagarnath to heed their advice.

In desperation, Jagarnath asked them the fault of that poor innocent girl. The leader told him loudly and somewhat angrily that she was no poor girl; she would soon be the proud mother of his child, the torchbearer of the seed of revolution. Sheila, who had been passively watching the things till then,

started crying and shaking her arms to tell her father that it was not true, but it was too late. The leader had put the barrel of the gun on the driver's head and ordered him to quit at once. Jagaranth was in a state of shock, and Sheila could do nothing but to stare at the swirling cloud of dust left behind by the speeding truck.

This was the beginning of Sheila's travails. She struggled to be herself, but failed because she could not withstand the aggression of the old and new leaders. She was used and abused by every one of them, and when she was drained of her will and the sap of her life, she became a mute witness to her derangement, creating a new symbol of pain and suffering. Aside from people who fell instantly to militant bullets, we have now a sizable number of these smouldering pyres of pain.

65

We have more reports from Jammu about the miserable existence of my brethren. They have been given a new name: 'migrants.' Every migrant family is paid some money by way of relief, in which the size of the family has been overlooked. This has forced many large families to register as several small families, for which they are being heavily criticized. Nobody seems to realize that with no place of their own and with no money to fall back upon, they had been left with no other choice.

Now I see that governments can be both human and inhuman. The present government has provided the Pandits with succour, for which they have expressed their gratefulness,

but it has also been evasive in admitting that they have suffered in the Valley. Leaders from the central government have always rushed to Srinagar to listen to the complaints of the Muslims, but they have not felt the need to see the misery of the Pandits in Jammu.

It is too early to guess, but I have a feeling that the apathetic attitude of the people in general and of the governments in particular towards the Pandits will have disastrous consequences for them. If they are not helped to return to their homes in the Valley, they will lose their language, customs, and traditions, and get assimilated into the other cultural identities of the country. As a community, they will become extinct.

Is their nobody to speak for them, to save them from becoming extinct? The human rights organizations of the country spare no efforts in espousing the cause of the suffering Muslims of the Valley, which is laudable, but hardly anybody has spoken about the Pandits in this vein.

In this huge land, we have been more than marginalized. We may not even form a part of the history of the times because we have been denied a presence, a voice. We are truly invisible.

What will be our fate? What about Sunil? Where is he? Why has he forgotten me?

What about my fate? Will I survive to tell what it has been like with me, and how I feel about it?

66

Yesterday evening a strange and unusual calmness descended on me. After a very long time, I felt light and carefree. Being totally out of tune with the turbulence and turmoil around me, this new mood, which was so soothing, did not last long; in no time, it proved a source of nervous anxiety. My mind rushed into panic waves. Did it signify a prelude to something disturbing? Was it a kind of a lull before the storm? An intimation of fresh troubles? To overcome this dreadful condition in which restful calmness and apprehensive thoughts jumbled in an uneasy mix, I decided to escape into my bed. Fortunately, it worked. I fell asleep almost instantly for I do not remember anything after putting my head on the pillow.

When I woke up in the morning, I was at peace with myself, so much so that I became totally forgetful of all the confusion and chaos of the world outside. I felt far away from it, somewhere else, and then I remembered the dream I had that night, in which I found myself on a secluded road, which stretched long ahead of me. Not knowing where I was, and not being sure of what I was doing there, I decided to walk on with the hope of seeing somebody who could help me know what it was all about. After about ten minutes, I reached a crossing where I had to stop, to decide on which way to take. Without any knowledge of where the roads led to, I had no alternative but to take a blind chance. Almost on an impulse, I decided to take the road on my right.

Within minutes, things changed. I heard human sounds,

sighted houses in the distance, and soon after I saw men and women moving about in different directions. Coming closer to them, I was disappointed to find that they were total strangers to me. I could also see that they did not take any notice of me. In the hope of meeting a familiar face, I moved ahead; even this did not help. I was on the verge of speaking to one of the men, when I chanced to see a lane in which I saw several familiar faces of relatives and friends. I was thrilled and about to lunge towards them, when, in the corner of another lane, I saw my Grandfather standing, well-groomed and ready to attend some festive occasion, looking exactly like he did on the day of my marriage. He was moving his head left and right, as if waiting for somebody. Like an exultant child, I almost yelled, but restrained myself because I did not want to create a scene. When he beckoned me over, I rushed into his waiting arms.

Grandfather held me in his embrace, and asked me why I was so late in coming. This took me by surprise because I was not sure of what he was alluding to. So I asked, "Late for what?" Whispering into my ear, he reminded me of my promise of seeing him soon. I felt puzzled because I did not remember any promise I had made to him. If there were any signs of confusion on my face, Grandfather did not seem to notice. He put me at ease by telling me not to feel worried. The fact that I had showed up was all right with him.

After this, he took me along into another lane. We walked for a few minutes, bypassing many small and big houses. Soon after, I saw a tastefully decorated house, and I could hear strains of music and loud conversation overflowing from every room. Like many other people who were standing on the road,

I was tempted to linger there for a while, to listen to the song that wafted gently in the bracing air of the evening, but Grandfather held my arm and pulled me away, as if it was sinful to be there. His grip was so strong that I had no chance of wrenching myself away from him.

I could see that Grandfather's eyes were focused on another house, which was some distance away from us. We were there in no time. Once inside, we moved through its dark alleys and climbed several flights of serpentine steps, and reached a big room where I beheld an awesome sight. Squatting on the floor, which was fully covered with a well-designed carpet, were all the dead elders from my mother's and father's families. When they saw me, I could hear them heave a sigh of relief. There was a smile on their faces and love and compassion in their eyes. Almost in a ritual manner, one by one, they got up from their places, held me in their arms, and spoke endearingly to me in whispering tones. All of them sympathized with my situation and told me how saddened they were by the pain and suffering that had befallen me. They assured me that it would end soon, and I would be freed from all my miseries. They had entrusted Grandfather with the job of working out all the arrangements.

I was so overwhelmed by what I saw and heard from these venerable people that I did not know how to respond to their solicitous concern for me. Even before I could say anything, I saw my maternal grandfather, looking grave and gloomy as usual, leaving his seat from the distant corner of the room, and coming over towards me. Instantly, he kissed me on my forehead, hugged me with unusual warmth, and was almost on the verge of saying something, but no words came from

his trembling lips. Only his sad face and moist eyes told me that he felt distressed by my condition. With a gentle pat on my back, he handed me over to Grandfather and walked towards the place he had come from.

Then Grandfather took me to meet a sweet-looking elderly woman wearing the traditional Kashmiri dress: beautifully decked headgear with chocolate coloured pheran and a matching bandana firmly tied round her waist. He said that she was the grandmother I had not seen because she had died before my birth. When I sat near her, I could feel the warm glow of her face. Gently, she put her small hands on my face, letting her long and tender fingers go slowly over my forehead, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and chin. I felt as if I was under some spell, for I submitted to her touch without any resistance, and she seemed to enjoy it all.

It struck me as something odd, but I realized it in no time that though she had beautiful big eyes, she was blind. With a questioning look, I turned towards Grandfather. He understood its import, and confirmed my suspicion, but said something very interesting: "She can see all of us, but not you. It is because she had no chance of seeing you in the world of the living, for you were not born then."

When I looked at her again, her face radiated peace and joy. She told me that though she knew everything about me from Grandfather, she had longed to see me, and also to feel me. It sounded strange, because she had no vision, but I did not say anything.

My grandmother's gentle touch and Grandfather's soothing words were like a balm for my tired body. I felt relaxed and refreshed, and opened my eyes. For a moment, I

really felt confused because the traces of my dream clouded my vision. Slowly it dawned on me that I was in my home, right in the thick of trouble that had seemed so distant only a short while ago.

67

The unusualness of the dream haunted me for the whole morning. I went over it again and again, trying to interpret it from all possible angles, but could not arrive at any definitive interpretation. It was mainly because I wasn't sure whether meeting one's dead ancestors forebode good or ill. Perhaps it could be resolved by consulting some knowledgeable person, but there was no possibility of meeting anybody till the evening. Again and again, the gloomy face of my maternal grandfather passed before my eyes, and I felt the cold fingers of my grandmother on my face. Although I had boiled milk and cooked an omelette for my breakfast, I did not feel like eating anything.

Around this time I heard a knock on the door. Because I knew that a knock during the daytime did not bode any ill, I came down to see who it could be. This time I was in for a surprise: there were armed youths outside. My heart missed a beat. I rushed back to hide my pages, and I could hear the knocks growing louder in their volume and intensity ...23 August 1990.

Born in Kashmir in 1944, Tej N. Dhar is currently a Professor of English in Asmara University, North-East Africa. Author of *History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel*, Dhar has published creative pieces and literary features in many prominent dailies and journals.

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